

⚓ HONOR ⚓
OF THIEVES



C. J. CUTCLIFFE HYNE

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

Chap. 35 Copyright No.

Shelf PZ3
11998 Ho

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

HONOR OF THIEVES

HONOR OF THIEVES

A Novel

BY

C. J. CUTCLIFFE HYNE

AUTHOR OF

"THE NEW EDEN," "THE RECIPE FOR DIAMONDS," "ADVENTURES OF
CAPTAIN KETTLE," "THROUGH ARCTIC LAPLAND," ETC., ETC.



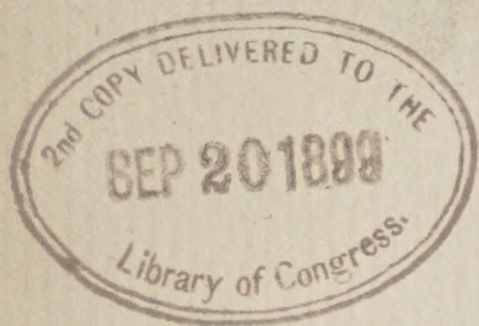
R. F. FENNO & COMPANY : 9 AND 11 EAST
SIXTEENTH STREET : NEW YORK CITY

LONDON — CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1899

c

SECOND COPY.



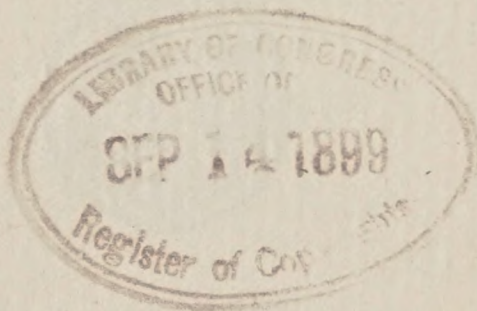
PZ3
H998H0

42193
Copyright, 1895-1899

BY

C. J. CUTCLIFFE HYNE

TWO COPIES RECEIVED.



Honor of Thieves.

32587
may 15 '99.

TO
MY VARIOUS SHIPMATES
AND SHOREMATES
ON SEA AND AMERICAN LAND IN 1893
IN MEMORY OF
WHAT WE SAW TOGETHER AND WHAT WE DID.

C. J. C. H.

PREFACE.

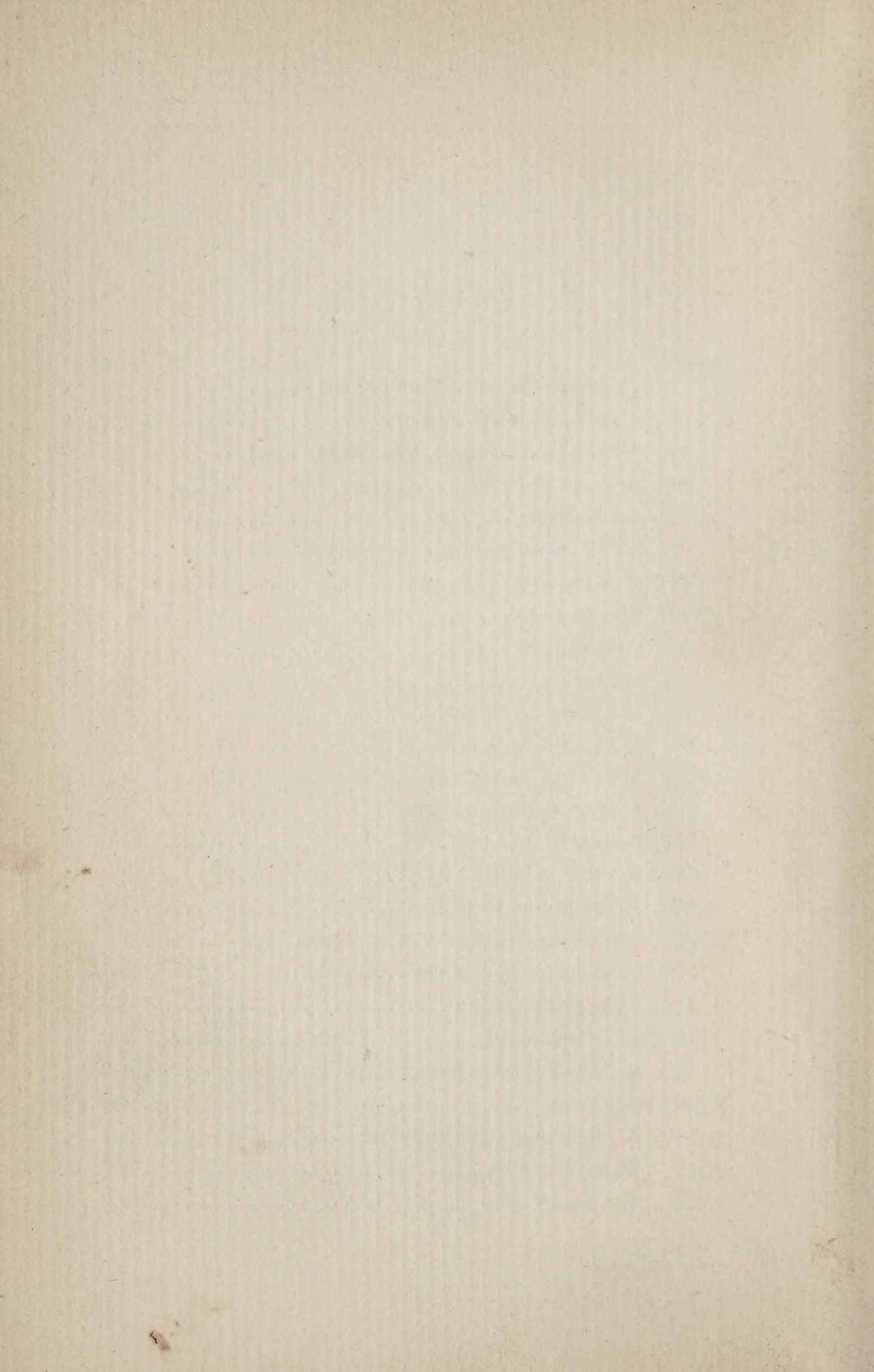
"IT seems to me," said a philosopher once, "that there are no entirely good men in the world, and none completely bad. Single out your best man, and you will find that he lacks perfection in some part of him; and examine your worst, and you will see that he has at least one redeeming quality."

In this book the men mostly verge towards bad: but some are better than others. Because they are merely human, they act according to their lights. You may meet others like them any day if you go out and about, and most of them give extremely good dinners. Till they are found out, you consider them amusing: afterwards, being better than they, you instantly set them down as most pernicious scoundrels, and shake hands with yourself, and write to your tailor to order more noticeable phylacteries on the next new suit. This is called "keeping up a healthy moral tone," and does a great deal of good in the world.

SCALLOWAY,
SHETLAND ISLANDS,
1895.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. The Antecedents of Patrick Onslow.....	11
II. A Fortune for the Pair of us.....	18
III. The Requirements of Mrs. Shelf.....	27
IV. Business at a Ball.....	36
V. Bimetallism.....	44
VI. The Tempting of Captain Owen Kettle.....	55
VII. £500,000—in Gold.....	66
VIII. The Send-off.....	75
IX. Ground-Bait.....	88
X. Mutiny	100
XI. To-Night	111
XII. A Dereliction.....	124
XIII. Three for Twenty-seven.....	137
XIV. A Pirates' Harbor	147
XV. Results in London.....	162
XVI. For the Birthday List.....	170
XVII. In the Matter of a Trust.....	184
XVIII. The Plume-Hunters' Dinner-Party.....	198
XIX. Subjects for Matrimony	213
XX. At Point Sebastian	224
XXI. The Cyclone.....	235
XXII. Mr. Shelf's Little Surprise.....	250
XXIII. Decisions.. ..	263
XXIV. A Flight and a Resting-place	277
XXV. Closing Strands.....	288
XVI. The Lucky Man	295



HONOR OF THIEVES.

CHAPTER I.

THE ANTECEDENTS OF PATRICK ONSLOW.

MISS RIVERS picked out the name of Patrick Onslow in the society paper which lay upon her knee, and drew idle circles round it with a pink ball-pencil. Fairfax tugged at his mustache, and returned to the subject which they had been discussing.

"The fellow has," said Fairfax, "a genial insolence of manner which seems rather taking with some people. But I confess I shouldn't have thought him the man you would have cared to see twice, Amy."

"You're prejudiced, obviously ; and I've a good mind to say maliciously prejudiced. I don't know how much you saw of him, because I can't be invited to a Wanderers' Club dinner ; you don't know how much I saw of him, because you missed some distant train and didn't come here to the ball last night. But I'll tell you : I saw all I

could. He's perfectly and entirely charming. He's been everywhere, done everything, and he isn't a bit *blasé*."

"I heard," said Fairfax, "that Mrs. Shelf was lionizing Onslow round last night as the great traveler. Does he belong to the advertising variety of globe-trotter? Did he sit in a side room and hold a small audience spellbound with a selection from his adventures?"

Miss Rivers shrugged her shoulders. "Not he. But you know what Mrs. Shelf is when she gets any show person at one of her functions. The poor man had to stand it for a while, because she held on to him as though he might have been her fan. But he escaped as soon as he decently could by saying he wanted to dance. He asked me to give him the fourth waltz. I did it out of sheer pity, because I saw Mrs. Shelf's thumb-screws were making him writhe."

"Shows how little a man knows about the girl he's engaged to. Now, I had always imagined that, having the pick of the men, you invariably wrote down the best dancers, and never saddled yourself with a stranger who was a very possible duffer."

Amy Rivers laughed. "That's generalizing. But it was different last night, because, so to speak, I'm a member of the household here. A ward counts as a sort of niece, doesn't she? - Or

between that and an adopted daughter? But, anyway, it was out of sheer pity for Mr. Onslow in the first instance, and it was with distinct qualms that I let him take me down to dance. I quite intended, after half a round, to say the room was too crowded, and go and sit somewhere. That is to say, I made up my mind to do this when he asked me. However, when I dropped my fingers on his arm to go down-stairs, I had my doubts. You know after two seasons one gets instinctively to know by the first touch how a man will dance. And when he put his arm around me, and we moved to the music, I felt like going on forever. Waltzing is hard just now, because it's in a transition state between two styles; but his dancing was something to dream about. We started off with the newest quick waltz. Hamilton, it was just lovely! He was so perfect that just for experiment I altered my step—by degrees, you know. Automatically, and without anything being seen, he changed too; and we were dancing the old slow glide before I knew. And his steering was perfect. In that whirling, teeming, tangled mob he never bumped me once. I gave him two more waltzes, and cut another couple in his favor."

"Which makes five in all," said Fairfax, rather stiffly.

Amy Rivers took his hand and patted it.

"Don't be cross, dear. You know how I love a good dance, and one doesn't meet a partner like Mr. Onslow every day. I suppose he's done his waltzing in Vienna and Paris, and Yorkshire, and New Orleans, as well as here in London; and by averaging them all up he can't help but be good."

"Is it from going to those places that Mrs. Shelf called him the Great Traveler?"

"Of course not! Hamilton, how stupid you are about him! Why, he's rummaged about in every back corner of the world, so they say."

"So they say, yes! Teheran to Timbuctoo. But what does he say himself about his wanderings beyond the tram-lines? Shuffles mostly, doesn't he? And who's met him anywhere? Not a soul will come forward to speak. I tell you, Amy, there's something uncanny about this Patrick Onslow. He turns up here periodically in London after some vague exploring trip to a place that isn't mapped, and you can never pin him to tell exactly where he's been. He comes with money, spends it *en prince*, and then goes off again, nominally perhaps to the Gobi Desert, and returns with another cargo."

"How romantic!" said Miss Rivers.

"Yes, isn't it?" said her *fiancé* drily. "If he'd lived a century earlier, one would have said he'd got a sound business connection as a pirate somewhere West Indies way. As this year is eighteen

ninety-three, and that explanation's barred, one simply has to accept him as an uncomfortable mystery."

"Hamilton, how absurd you are! Wherever did all this rigmarole come from?"

"From the club, and London gossiping places generally. I suppose we ought to be indebted to Onslow for providing us with something to talk about."

"But tell me; if his antecedents are so queer, how is it he goes about so much here? He's apparently asked everywhere—at least, so Mrs. Shelf says—and he knows everybody who's worth knowing."

Fairfax laughed. "Why does London society take up with an ex-bushranger from Australia, or a glorified advertising cowboy from the wild, wild West? Simply because London society is extremely parochial, and gets desperately bored with its own little self undiluted. Now, Onslow has undoubtedly wandered about outside the parish; and occasionally he lets drop hints which make one think he's seen some queerish ups and downs in places where polite society doesn't go; and, in fact, he preserves a good-humored reticence about most of his doings. This makes people thoughtful and speculative. If a Chinese extradition warrant was to turn up to-morrow to arrest him for sticking up a three-button man-

darin beyond the Great Wall, nobody would be a bit surprised; or if he were to tell the City this afternoon that he'd a concession for a silver mine in an unexplored part of Venezuela which he wished to dispose of at reasonable rates, we'd take it with pleased equanimity. Now, you know, Amy, there's a fearful joy in entertaining a man of that stamp."

"Especially when he's as fascinating as Mr. Onslow can be when he chooses. And such a waltzer! But you speak as if he was a savage from some back settlement, come into decent society for the first time. He isn't that in the least. He's a gentleman distinctly."

"My dear Amy, I never meant to suggest that he was not. There's no particular secret about his life. He comes of a good west-county family; was a Harrow boy, and played in their eleven; went through Cambridge; and afterwards found a berth in the Diplomatic Service. Then, by way of variety, he got engaged to be married to a girl who jilted him; on the strength of which he began to run wild. He started on six months' leave for a trip into Tibet, but he stayed beyond the limits of the postal system for two years and a half, and when he got back to England the Diplomatic Corps found that they could get on very well without him. So he continued his rambles. He doesn't seem able to settle down."

The Antecedents of Patrick Onslow. 17

"That's because he can't forget the girl who threw him over," exclaimed Miss Rivers. "How awfully romantic! I wonder who she was? She couldn't have been anybody nice, or she wouldn't have done it, because he's a regular dear. And fancy his remembering her all this time! I just love him for it."

"Some fellows," remarked Fairfax judiciously, "would get jealous if the girl they were going to marry talked about another man this way."

Miss Rivers reassured him first practically, and then in words. "You goose!" said she; "if I cared for him in that way, don't you see, I shouldn't have spoken about him to you at all."

Fairfax did not answer directly. He kissed her thoughtfully, and after a while he said: "I'm not superstitious, dear, as a general thing. Work in a shipping office tends to make one painfully matter of fact. But for all that, I wish this fellow Onslow would either marry or get crumpled up in a cab accident, or have himself safely fastened down out of harm's way somewhere. I've got a foreboding, Amy, that he's going to do a bad turn either to you or to me—which means both of us. I know it's absurd, but I can't get rid of it."

"How creepy!" said Amy Rivers. "But what nonsense, Hamilton!"

CHAPTER II

A FORTUNE FOR THE PAIR OF US.

MR. THEODORE SHELF'S carriage and pair drew up at the smartest house in Park Lane, and Mr. Theodore Shelf went up the steps and entered the door which a man servant opened for him. He was a stout, middle-aged man, with a clean-shaven face, and a short frock-coat of black broadcloth. He allowed himself to be eased of his hat and umbrella, and then passed through the gorgeous hall to the rosewood billiard-room at the back. There he found his guest, Mr. Patrick Onslow, in shirt-sleeves, practising fancy shots by himself.

"What, alone, Mr. Onslow?"

"Why, yes. I did have a hundred up with your niece earlier, but some one came for her."

"Niece? Oh, Amy, you mean—Miss Rivers? Ah, my dear sir! from the love we have for her in this household, and the way we treat her, you naturally fancy she is a blood relation. It is a graceful compliment for you to pay, Mr. Onslow; but it is my duty to correct you. Miss Rivers is legally only my ward."

"Ward? Oh, see that? Red hard against the cushion, and white bang over the bottom pocket. Neat cannon, wasn't it, considering the long time since I've handled a cue?"

"The only child of my late partner. You know, the firm still stands as Marmaduke Rivers and Shelf. We call ourselves on the billheads, 'Agents to the Oceanic Steam Transport Co.,' though, of course, we really own the whole line. You see our flag, sir, in every sea."

"I know. Nagasaki to Buenos Ayres; gin and gunpowder on the West Coast; coals and cotton at New Orleans."

"And we do not send our steamers for the business of trade alone, Mr. Onslow. We pick our captains and officers with an eye to a holier purpose. We trust that they spread a Christian influence in all their ports of call," observed Mr. Shelf unctuously.

"Yes; I saw them at work once at Axim, on a tramp steamer you sent down there. They were taking Krooboyes on board. The skipper received them on one of the bridge-deck ladders with a knuckleduster, and kicked 'em along. The chief stood by with a monkey-wrench and tickled them with that as they passed down to the lower deck aft. They mentioned at the time that this process had a fine Christianizing influence; prevented the boys from being uppish; showed 'em what the

white man could do when he liked ; taught 'em humility, in fact. I say, there's a pull towards this bottom pocket. People have been sitting on the table."

" Mr. Onslow—Mr. Onslow, you are making a very serious accusation against one of my ship's companies."

" Accusations? I? Never a bit of it. The fellows only acted according to their lights. That's the only way sailor-men know of getting Krooboys to work ; and it was a case of squeezing the work out of them or having the natural sack from you. And so, as they didn't know another method, they fell back on knuckleduster and monkey-wrench. I'll play you fifty up."

Mr. Shelf put up a large white hand. " No ; I don't play billiards myself. So many young men have been ruined by the pursuit, that I refrain from it by way of setting an example. But my friends who visit here are not so scrupulous, and I have the table for them."

" Beautiful !" said Onslow. He might have been referring to his own play, or to Mr. Shelf's improving sentiment.

" You see, Mr. Onslow, from my position, so many people look up to me that it is nothing short of my bounden duty to deprive myself of certain things, and be, so far as possible, a humble model for them to form themselves by. Long

before a constituency sent me to Parliament, I devoted my best energies to Christianizing the lower classes, and I hope not without success. If appreciation is any criterion, I may say that I was elected president of no less than twelve improvement societies. It took me much time and thought to attend to them. Yet I wish I could have given more."

"Yes—that pocket does pull; there's a regular tram-line towards it. H'm, mighty good work of yours. But doesn't it sour on you sometimes? Don't you want a day off occasionally? A run down to Monte Carlo, for instance?"

"Monte Carlo! You horrify me, Mr. Onslow. You are my guest, and I cannot speak strongly; but this is a very poor jest of yours."

"Well, perhaps you know best about that place. Monte Carlo is risky at the best of times for some folks, because you're bound to meet crowds of people you know; and if they aren't on the razzle-dazzle too, and pinned to decent silence through their own iniquities, some of them are apt to split when they get home again. But I don't know why you should be horrified, seeing that we are *entre quatre yeux* here, and not on one of your pious example platforms. You know you've been in a far hotter shop than Monte Carlo.—See me pot that red? Ah, *rouge perd*—Barcelona, to wit. If you remember, you were staying at the Cuatro

Naciones, and at nights you used to cross the Rhambla, and——”

“Mr. Onslow, how did you know all this?”

“Do you remember objecting to take a sheaf of obvious spurious notes, and there was a row, and somebody whipped out a knife, and somebody else floored the knife-man with a chair?”

“Yes—no.”

“After which you very sensibly bolted. Well, I had only just that moment come in, but I saw you were a fellow-islander, and that’s why I handled the chair. You don’t remember me, and I didn’t know your name, but I recognized you the moment your wife introduced us, because I never forget a face.”

“You’re mistaken. I never was in such a place in my life, sir. Think of the position I occupy. Why, the thing’s absurd!”

“Now, my good sir, why waste lies? I’m not going to show you up. No fear. Why should I? It would probably ruin you, and I should stand self-convicted of being in the lowest and most desperate gambling hell in Europe, without being made a sixpence richer by the transaction. Only you didn’t know me, and you thought I didn’t know you; and I thought it would be handier if we were open about one another’s little ways at once before we went any further. Who knows but what we might be partners in some profitable

business together?" Onslow put his cue down and faced his host, with hands deep in his trousers pockets. "It's worth thinking about," he observed.

Mr. Theodore Shelf stood before the fireplace and drew a handkerchief across his forehead with trembling fingers. "What business do you refer to?" he asked at length.

"None whatever. I'm not a business man. I make discoveries and don't know how to use them. You are a business man and may be able to see where the money profit comes in. If you can, why then we'll share the plunder. If you can't, we're neither of us worse off than before."

"But this is vague. What sort of discoveries? Have you found a mine?"

"No, sir; in the present instance a channel!"

"A channel?—I don't understand you."

"A deep-water channel leading in to a certain coast, where everybody else supposes there is nothing but shallow water. The Government charts put down the place as partly unsurveyed, but all impossible for navigation. The upgrowth of coral, they say, is turning part of the sea into dry land. In a large measure this is true; but at one point—which I have discovered—a river comes down from the interior, and the scour of this river has cut a deep narrow channel out through the reefs to the deep sea water beyond."

"Well," Shelf broke in, "I see no value in that."

"Wait a minute! In confidence I'll tell you it is on the West Coast of Florida—on the Mexican Gulf coast. The interior of southern Florida is called the Everglades. It's partly lake, partly swamp; built up of mangroves, saw-grass, cypress trees, and water; tenanted by snakes, alligators, wild beasts, and a few Seminole Indians. Only one expedition of whites has been across it—or rather only one expedition known to history. But I've been there, right into the heart of the Everglades; in fact, I've just come from there; and I netted £1000 out of the trip."

"How?" asked Shelf, eagerly.

"Never mind exactly how. That's partly another man's business. Shall we say the other man gave me a commission there, and I carried it out, and got duly paid? Anyway, that's sufficient explanation. But now about this channel I've found. If one gives it to the chart people, they'll simply say, 'Thank you,' and publish your name in one number of an official magazine which nobody reads. I don't long for fame of that kind. I've the sordid taste to much prefer gold."

"I think I understand you," said Shelf. "Give me a minute to think it out."

"A week if you like," said the other; and, picking up his cue, again returned to the billiard-table.

The balls clicked lazily, and the rosewood clock

marked off the seconds with firmness and precision. Shelf lay back in his chair, his finger-tips together beneath the square chin, his eyes watching the shadows which the lamps cast on the frescoed ceiling. He looked entirely placid. No one would have guessed the simmer of thoughts which were poppling and bubbling in his brain. A stream of projects came before him, flashed into detail, and were dismissed as impracticable. It was the great trait of this man's genius that he could think with the speed of a hurricane, and clear his head of an unprofitable idea a moment after it was born.

Twenty schemes occurred to him, all to be dismissed: and then came the twenty-first; and that stayed. He ran a mental finger through all its leading details: he conned over a thousand minutiae. It was the thing to suit his purpose.

A bare minute had passed, but he needed no more time for his deliberations. The scheme seemed perfect to him, without flaw, without chance of improvement. The hugeness of it thrilled him like a draught of spirit. He was betrayed away from his unctuous calm; his hands dropped on to the arms of the chair.

With a heavy start he clambered to his feet, strode forward, and seized Onslow by the arm. "If your channel and Everglades will answer a

purpose I want, there's half a million of English sovereigns to be made out of it."

Onslow turned and faced him with a long, thin-drawn whistle. "£500,000! Phew!"

"Hush! there's somebody coming. But it's to be had if you're not afraid of a little risk."

"I fear nothing on this earth," said Onslow, "when it's to my interest not to fear. Moreover, though I'm not a saint, my standard of morality is probably a shade higher than yours. I don't mind doing some sorts of dirty things; but there are shades in dirtiness, and at some tints I draw the line. It's dangerous to—er—have the tips of these cues glued on so badly. They fly off and hit people."

The billiard-room door had opened, and Amy Rivers had come in, with Fairfax at her heels. Hence Onslow's digression. The matter had not been put in so many words; but he felt sure that the commission of a great robbery had been proposed to him, and he had more than half a mind to drive his knuckles into Theodore Shelf's lying, hypocritical face on the spot.

CHAPTER III.

THE REQUIREMENTS OF MRS. SHELF.

MR. THEODORE SHELF wanted to drag Onslow off there and then to his own business-room, on the first floor, to discuss further this great project which he had in his head; but Onslow thought fit to remain where he was. Mr. Shelf nodded significantly towards the new-comers, as much as to hint that a third person with them would be distinctly an inconvenient third. Onslow turned to them, cue in hand, and proposed a game of snooker.

"That's precisely what we came up for," said Amy Rivers promptly. "Hamilton, get out the balls. Mr. Onslow, will you put the billiard-balls away, so that they don't get mixed?"

They played and talked merrily. Their conversation turned on the wretched show at the recent Academy, which they agreed was a disgrace to a civilized country; and Onslow made himself interesting over the art of painting in Paris—mural, facial, and on canvas. When he chose he could be very interesting, this man

London had nicknamed "The Great Traveler"; and he generally chose, not being ill-natured.

Mr. Theodore Shelf left the billiard-room with a feeling beneath his waistcoat much akin to seasickness. First of all, that plain-spoken Patrick Onslow had not over politely hinted that he was a canting hypocrite, and had showed cause for arriving at the conclusion. This was true, but that didn't make it any the more digestive. And secondly, he himself, in a moment of excitement, had let drop to this same pernicious Onslow (who after all was a comparative stranger) a proposal to make the sum of £500,000 at one *coup*. True, he had not mentioned the means; but Onslow had at once concluded it was to be gained by robbery, and he (Theodore Shelf) had not denied the impeachment.

Consequently Mr. Shelf went direct to his own room, locked the door, and fortified his nerves with a liberal allowance of brandy. Then he munched a coffee-bean in deference to the blue ribbon on his coat-lapel, replaced the cognac bottle in the inner drawer of his safe, and sat down to think.

If only he understood Onslow, and, better still, knew whether he might trust him, there was a fortune to be had. Yes, a fortune! And it was wanted badly. The great firm of Marmaduke Rivers and Shelf, which called itself "Agents to

the Oceanic Steam Transport Co.," but which really ran the line of steamers which traded under that flag, might look prosperous to the outer eye, and might still rear its head haughtily amongst the first shipping firms of London port. But the man who bragged aloud that he owned it all, from offices to engine-oil, knew otherwise. He had mortgages out in every direction, mortgages so cunningly hidden that only he himself was aware of their vast total. He knew that the firm was rotten—lock, stock, and barrel. He knew that through any one of twenty channels a break-up might come any day; and, following on the heels of that, a smash, which would be none the pleasanter because, from its size and devastating effects, it would live down into history.

He, Theodore Shelf, would assuredly not be in England to face it. Since his commercial barometer had reached "stormy," and still showed signs of steady descent, he had been transmitting carefully modulated doles to certain South American banks, and had even gone so far as to purchase (under a *nom d'escroc*) a picturesquely situated estancia on the upper waters of the Rio Paraguay.

There, in case the tempest of bankruptcy broke, the extradition treaties would cease from troubling, and the weary swindler would be at well-fed rest.

But Mr. Theodore Shelf had no lust for this tropical retirement. He liked the powers of his present pinnacle in the City. And that howl of execration from every class of society which would make up his pæan of defeat was an opera that he very naturally shrank from sitting through.

As he thought of these things, he hugged closer to him the wire-haired fox-terrier which sat upon his lap.

"George, old friend," said Mr. Shelf, "if things do go wrong, I believe you are the only thing living in England which won't turn against me."

George slid out a red tongue and licked the angle of Mr. Shelf's square chin. Then he retired within himself again, and looked sulky. The door had opened, and Mrs. Shelf stood on the mat. There was a profound mutual dislike between George and Mrs. Theodore Shelf.

"You alone, Theodore? I thought Mr. Onslow was here. However, so much the better. I have wanted to speak with you all the morning. Do turn that nasty dog away!"

George was not evicted, and Mr. Shelf inquired curtly what his wife was pleased to want. She seldom invaded this business-room of his, and, when she did, it was for a purpose which he was beginning to abhor. She came to the point at once by handing him a letter, which was mostly

in copperplate. He read it through with brief, sour comment.

"H'm! Bank. Your private account overdrawn. That's the third time this year, Laura. Warning seems to be no use. You are determined to know what ruin tastes like."

"Ruin, pshaw! You don't put me off with that silly tale. To begin with, I don't believe it for an instant; and even if it were true, I'd rather be ruined than retrench. You and I can afford to be candid between ourselves, Theodore. You know perfectly well that we have gained our position in society purely and solely by purchase."

"To my cost I do know it. But having paid your entrance fee at least eight times over, I think you might be content with an ordinary subscription. The ball last night, for instance——"

"Was necessary. And I couldn't afford to do the thing otherwise than gorgeously."

"Gorgeously! Do you think I'm a Cræsus, Laura, to pay for gearing one room with red roses, and another room with pink, and another room with Marshal Niels for fools to flit in during one short night? This morning's paper informs me that those flowers came by special express from Nice, and cost five hundred pounds."

"And yet you twit me with extravagance! All the papers have got in that paragraph, as I took care they should; and everybody will read

it. Yet the flowers only cost a paltry three hundred pounds, so that in credit I am two hundred to the good, because I have clearly given *the* ball of the season. Theodore, you are short-sighted; you are a fool to your own profit. By myself I shall make you a baronet this year, and if you had only worked in your own interests half as hard as I have done, you could have entered the House of Lords."

"Titles," said Shelf grimly, "for people of our stamp, are only given for direct cash outlay in almshouses, or picture galleries, or political clubs. Before they are bestowed, a Crown censor satisfies himself that one's financial position is broad and absolutely sound. There are reasons connected with those matters which block you further and further from being 'milady' every day."

Mrs. Shelf shrugged her shoulders in utter unbelief. "Your preaching tendencies cover you like a second skin, Theodore. It seems as if you never drop the conventicle and the pleasure of pointing a moral at one. Believe me, it isn't a paying speculation, this cant of yours. At the most they would only give you a trumpery knighthood for it. But go your own way, and I'll go mine. You shall be made in spite of yourself."

Mrs. Shelf noticed that at this point her husband's eyes were beginning to glow with dull

The Requirements of Mrs. Shelf. 33

fury. She objected to scenes ; and, dropping the subject, reverted once more to her present needs.

“ However, let us stop this wrangle, and come to business. I wish you to see to that impertinent circular from the bank. I have several checks out, and unpresented ; I am absolutely compelled to draw others to-day, for trifles which will add up to about a thousand. You will kindly see that they are honored. It is all your own fault, this trumpery worry about nothing. You should not try and screw me down to such a niggardly allowance.”

Shelf stood up, and the dog on his lap leaped hurriedly to the ground growling. “ Woman ! ” he said passionately, “ you won’t believe me ; but if you will go on in this mad extravagance, you will soon learn for yourself that I am not lying—perhaps very soon. Perhaps to-morrow. When a shameful bankruptcy does come, then you can play your hand as you please. I shall not be here to hinder you any longer. Where shall I go, how I shall lead my new life, who will be my partner, are matters which you will be allowed no finger in. So long as things last here, I shall observe all the conventionalities ; and, if you appreciate those, you will find it wise to reconsider your present ways. I tell you candidly that if the firm does go down, not only England, but

half the world will ring with its transactions. Marmaduke Rivers and Shelf," he went on with scowling fury, "were honest, prosperous tradesmen once, before their ways were fouled to find money for your cursed ambition."

There was a new look on Theodore Shelf's clean-shaven face which his wife had never seen before, and an evil glint in the eyes which scared her. Irresolutely she moved towards the door and put her fingers upon the handle. Then she drew herself up and stared him up and down with a look of forced contempt. "You will be good enough," she said coldly, "to attend to the business which brought me here. I am going now to draw the checks I spoke about."

Shelf looked at her very curiously. "Go," he said, "and do as you please. You are a determined woman, and, because I am determined myself, I admire your strength of will; but for all that I think I shall murder you before I leave England."

Mrs. Shelf laughed derisively, but with pale lips; and then she opened the door.

"What fine heroics," she said. "But thanks for seeing after my balance. I must have that money."

She passed through the door, closing it gently behind her, and Shelf returned to his armchair.

"George," he said, as the fox-terrier stood up

The Requirements of Mrs. Shelf. 35

against his knee, "if that woman were only struck dead to-day, there are two thousand families in England who would rejoice madly if they only knew one-tenth part of what I know. Poor beggars, they have trusted me to the hilt, and she makes me behave to them like a fiend. D'you know, my small animal, I wish very much just now an earthquake or a revolution or something like that would occur, to shuffle matters up. Then if I got killed I should be spared a great deal of worry; and if I didn't, why I've got large hands, and I believe could grab enough in the general scramble to suit even her. As it is, however, with neither earthquake nor revolution probable, I'm a desperate man, ready to take any desperate chance of commercial salvation. Eh, well!" he concluded, as he reached for a paper-block and rested it on George's back, "worrying myself about the matter won't improve it. The only thing is to try and keep things running in their present groove." He broke off and scribbled a Biblical text. "Other men would have been suspected long before this. But my reputation has saved me." He smiled to himself softly. "What a thing it is to be known as a thoroughly good man!" *or woman.*

He broke off at this point, and applied himself with gusto to writing his sermon for the ensuing Sunday.

CHAPTER IV.

BUSINESS AT A BALL.

WHEN people are engaged, they usually contrive to meet with frequency, and so Amy Rivers showed no very great surprise at seeing Fairfax again later in the evening. She only said: "Why, I didn't know you knew the Latchfords." To which Hamilton Fairfax replied that he did not know them, but had met another man at the club who was coming to the party, and that the other man had brought him.

"An extra male never matters at a big dance," said Fairfax. "Besides," he went on, "I wanted particularly to see you this evening. Since we parted last, I've heard of an estate for sale in Kent which I fancy would just suit us. The present holder wants money, and therefore it's going cheap; but there's another fellow after it, and I've only got the refusal till to-morrow morning. So you see I want your views on the subject at once."

"Very well," said Miss Rivers; "you shall tell me about it in, say, three dances from now. There are no programs here to-night; but I

have promised the next two waltzes and the square, and don't particularly want to cut them. In the mean time, I wish you would go and talk to Mrs. Shelf. She said when we were driving here that she wanted to speak to you. I don't know about what, but she'll tell you that herself."

"Right!" said Fairfax. "Ta-ta for the present!" And he went through the rooms till he saw the blaze of diamonds and rubies which decked the handsome person of Mrs. Theodore Shelf.

Mrs. Shelf had, as usual, a concourse of men round her. She was a woman who deliberately cultivated the art of fascination, because it was essential to her ambition; and men are always willing to be dazzled and fascinated. They were laughing when Fairfax came up. She saw him from the corner of her eyes, but for the moment took no notice of him. She leaned forward and delivered another sentence to the men before her through the top feathers of her fan, which sent through them another thrill of merriment; and then shut the fan with a click and turned to Fairfax.

The other men went away, still laughing, which was quite typical of Mrs. Shelf's powers. She always concluded her audiences dramatically. No actress on the stage had more knowledge of how to bring about an artistic "curtain."

She watched them go with a smile of mild triumph, but when she turned to Fairfax this had flitted away. There was distinct annoyance on her face.

"Why don't you know these people here?" she asked.

"Well, I suppose I may say that technically I do know Lady Latchford now. The chap who brought me introduced me to her. But of course she'll have forgotten me by this time."

"Then why didn't you stop and talk to her—amuse her—or, better still, be impertinent to her? You ought to have known the Latchfords before. Indeed, I thought you did; but to slip in like that, without a noise, was worse than a mistake—it was a crime. Don't you know that the Latchfords are useful? Really, Hamilton, you make me angry. You never make the slightest effort to get on, and know people who will be useful to you, and all that."

Fairfax felt half amused, half annoyed. He shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know what Amy will do with you when she marries," Mrs. Shelf went on. "You've no dash about you, no smartness. If you are left to yourself, you may make money, but you will never make a name."

"I'm not a man," said Fairfax, with a half-

angry laugh, "who would ever walk about in spurs and blow a trumpet."

"No," replied Mrs. Shelf; "you would, if you had your own way, work ten hours a day in the City, and then come home and sleep. Once a month you would give a dinner party to City friends, and talk shop the entire evening. In the end you would die, and have written on your gravestone, 'This was a dull, honest man, who made a million of money and no enemies.' Now I," said Mrs. Shelf, "should feel lonely beyond belief if I didn't know that there were people who hated and feared me. It gives one the sense of power, and that means confidence; and a woman with confidence gets on. It is only your harmless fool who is popular all round, and a person whom everybody in their innermost hearts despise, whatever they may say of him aloud. You must shake this mood off, Hamilton. Begin now. Go up to the Latchford woman, and be impertinent to her. Say the floor's so bad you can't dance on it, or the supper's poisoned you, or that there's a woman here who picks pockets. Put it nicely, you know, and make it cut, and then she'll ask you to her next function, because she'll think you too dangerous to make an enemy of."

"I don't feel equal to the job," said Fairfax. "It would probably end in my being kicked

there and then out of doors if I attempted such a thing."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Shelf. "Polite impertinence is the best possible *cachet* nowadays. And you must cut out some style for yourself. Go and begin now."

She dismissed him with a tap of her fan, and beckoned another man up.

Fairfax went off willingly enough, but he did not go and impress himself upon his hostess's memory by the crude process of baiting her. Instead, he hung about the rooms and idled away his time till Amy Rivers was ready for him, and then, slipping her arm through his, led her to a niche on a secluded staircase.

"Now," she said, "tell me all about this place in Kent."

He told her soberly and quietly all the details, and waxed dry over leases and repairs of outbuildings.

"It sounds lovely," she said when he had finished; "but you don't seem very enthusiastic over it yourself."

"That's not my way, dear. Mrs. Shelf has been telling me what a very dull young man I am, and suggested that I should commence improving matters by going up and insulting my hostess. I'm afraid I haven't done it. To begin with, I couldn't; and to go on with, she'd squash

me out of existence with a look, if I made the attempt. You see, Amy, I know my limitations ; I'm a tolerably heavy person, with limited powers of speech, and a subdued sense of humor."

"You might be brighter, that's a fact," Miss Rivers admitted candidly.

If you are tired of me, dear——"

Miss Rivers craned her neck down the line of the banisters, to make sure that no one was looking, and then drew Fairfax to her, and gave him a kiss.

"Don't be a great goose !" she said. "Only don't think that I am going to agree with you in everything. That would be far too dull and copy-booky. And don't think I imagine you perfect. I should hate you most cordially if you were."

"What are my faults?"

"Do you think I could tell you the whole list in a single evening? No, sir. Some day, when I am more than usually annoyed with you, I will begin early and read out a chapter of them. Till then, I'll bear with the lot. Tell me some more about this place in Kent."

"I have told you all I know. If you like the idea, we might run down to-morrow and see it ourselves, before we finally decide on the purchase. The only thing is about the price. You know I'm a tolerably well-off man, dear, but there

are limits to my capital, and most of it is well locked up. Of course this place has to be paid for in cash, which is the reason for its going so cheap."

"Well?"

"Well, I am afraid that alone it would not be wise for me to purchase it. But then one cannot get over the fact that you are an heiress—excuse my being unromantic and practical—and we are presumably not going to live on my income only. And so, if the house and its grounds should suit us, I was wondering whether you would feel disposed——"

"Oh, my dear child, how you do beat about the bush! Of course I'll help buy the place if we like it. Why shouldn't I? There's heaps of money, and there's no earthly reason why we shouldn't use it."

"But will the trustees let you have it?"

"I'm not of age for another year, but the trustees have discretionary power. At least, Mr. Shelf has, and he never thwarts me in anything. I believe he'd do anything for me. He is really the kindest man. If you like, Hamilton, I'll see him about it before he goes out to-morrow morning."

"I think that will be best, dear. You see, in the present state of the offer, one has to rush things."

"How much am I to ask him for?"

"Fifteen thousand pounds would do. I can manage the rest."

"Oh, he'll let me have that without any trouble at all. I'm sure of it. And if the other trustee was awkward, he'd advance it to me for the year out of his own pocket. Listen, there's the music going again. Aren't you going to dance with me to-night, Hamilton?"

"Ye-es, a waltz, or anything like that. But they're playing that abominable barn-dance. I think it's idiotic. Makes such a show of one's self. Let's sit it out here."

"Not I. I love the barn-dance. I do it well, and I dress for it. Consequently, my dear boy, I'm not going to miss it. You needn't kick up *your* heels unless you like, but I warn you I'm going to disport myself. Come along, and take me down-stairs. There now! you've ruffled my hair again."

"Come along, then," said Fairfax. "You can knock over my worst prejudices. I'll dance two barn-dances with you if I get the opportunity."

CHAPTER V.

BIMETALLISM.

IT was late in the evening when Patrick Onslow again found himself *en tête-à-tête* with his host. There had been people in to dinner at the house in Park Lane, but these had gone, and Mrs. Shelf and Amy Rivers followed them to Lady Latchford's dance. Mrs. Shelf had wished to carry Onslow also in her train, but that person stayed behind by a request which he could not very well refuse. "You will favor me very much by remaining here for the rest of the evening, Mr. Onslow," Shelf had said in his pompous way. "I have matters of the greatest moment which I wish to discuss with you."

"I hardly know how to begin," Shelf confessed uneasily, when they were alone.

"Then let me make a suggestion," said Onslow, with a laugh. "Come to the point at once. Let's have the plot without any introductory chapters. You've told me you've got a scheme on hand for turning my discovery into currency, and you've rather hinted that it's a dirty scheme.

The only question is, how dirty? Thanks to pressure of circumstances, I'm not an over-particular person; but on points I'm very squeamish; or, in other words, I draw the line somewhere. Unless I'm very vastly mistaken, your plan will involve one in downright knavery, which is a thing all sensible men avoid if possible. Now, in my ignorance, I fancied the find might be turned to account without climbing down to that."

"Oh," said Shelf, eagerly, "then you had a scheme in your head before you came to me?"

The other shrugged his shoulders and lit a cigar. "Just a dim outline, nothing more. You see, the interior of the Everglades is absolutely untouched, by the white man's weapons. It was vaguely supposed to be one vast lake, with oases of slime and mangroves. The lake was reported as too shallow for boats, and abounding with fevers, agues, and mosquitoes. Consequently it remained unexplored, and on the end of the Florida peninsula to-day no white man (barring myself and one or two others) has ever got further than five or eight miles in from the coast. Now, as I've told you, I was lucky enough to hit upon a fine deep ship-channel going in as far as the center-line, and I don't know how far beyond inside. There is good fertile country, a healthy climate and the best game-preserve on this earth. For the first comers, that interior will be just a sports-

man's paradise. My idea is two-wise. First sell the cream off the sport. Some men will give anything for shooting, and in this case there will also be the glamour of being pioneers. Each one will start determined to write a book of his opinions and doings when he gets back. By chartering a steamer and treating them well on board, they would have sporting *de luxe*, and one ought to get quite five-and-twenty chaps at five hundred guineas apiece. That gives the first crop. For the second, buy up an enormous tract of the land, which can be got for half nothing—say ten or fifteen cents an acre—boom it, and resell it in lots to Jugginses. They'll fancy they'll grow oranges, as all Englishmen do who try Florida. Perhaps they may grow them: who knows, if they keep off whisky and put in work? But that won't be the promoters' concern. They don't advertise that the land *will* produce oranges; they only guarantee that it would if it was given a chance; and that's all correct. Perhaps this is rough on the Jugginses; but as they crowd these British Islands in droves, and are always on the lookout for some one to shear them, I don't see why an Everglades Company shouldn't have their fleeces as well as anybody else. They're mostly wasters, and wouldn't do any mortal good anywhere; and it's a patriotic deed to cart them over our boundary ditch away from local mischief.

Besides, even if the worst comes to the worst, and the orange industry of Florida still refuses to make headway, the would-be growers needn't starve; nor need they even do what they'll probably hate more—and that's work. There's always sweet potatoes and mullet and tobacco to be got, and if that diet doesn't cloy, a man can have it there for mighty little exertion. Come, now. That's the pemmican of the plan. What do you think of it?"

"Much capital would be needed."

Onslow shrugged his shoulders. "Some, naturally, or I shouldn't have come to you. If I'd seen any way to pouching all the plunder single-handed you may bet your life, Mr. Theodore Shelf, I shouldn't have invited you into partnership."

"Returns, too, would be very slow."

"Not necessarily. Float the company, and then turn it over to another company for cash down."

"Moreover, when the—er—the young men you spoke about, found that the orange-groves did not produce at once in paying quantities, they would write home, and their parents would denounce me as a swindler in the newspapers."

"No, not you; the other company—the one you sold it to. But then apologists would arise to show that the Jugginses—don't shy at the word, sir—were lazy and ignorant, and also that

they absorbed the corn whisky of the country in excessive quantities. And then that company could grin smugly, and pose as a misunderstood benefactor. So its profits wouldn't be smirched in the least. Grasp that?"

"Yes, yes: I dare say you have worked it all out to yourself, and thought over the details so many times that the whole scheme seems entirely plausible. But looking at it from the view of a business man, I cannot say that it appears to be an enterprise I should care to embark in. You see it is so very much beyond the scope of my general operations that I—er—hesitate—er—you understand, I hesitate——"

"Yes," said Patrick Onslow, quietly, "you hesitate because you've got something ten times more profitable up your sleeve."

Shelf started, and shivered slightly.

"You may as well be candid and open with me," Onslow continued, "and tell me what you are driving at. If it suits me, I'll say so; and if it doesn't, I'll let you know with surprising promptness. And again, if we don't trade, you may rely on me not to gossip about your suggestion. I'm not the stone-throwing variety of animal. You see I live in a sort of semi-greenhouse myself."

There was a minute's pause, during which Theodore Shelf shifted about as though his chair

was uneven rock beneath him. Then he jerked out his tale sentence by sentence, squinting sideways at his companion between each period.

"You know I'm a shipowner in a large way of business?"

Onslow nodded.

"Ships are occasionally lost at sea: steamers, even new steamers straight out of a builder's yard, and well found in every particular."

"So I've read in the newspaper."

"And every shipowner insures his vessels to the full of their value."

"Except when he has a foreboding that they will come to grief on a voyage. Then, so rumor says, he usually has the forethought to over-insure."

Mr. Theodore Shelf passed a handkerchief over his forehead, and started what was apparently a new topic.

"There is a silver crisis on just now in the United States, and by this morning's paper the dollar is down at sixty cents. American gold is not to be had. English gold is always worth its face value. What more natural financial operation could there be than to ship out sovereigns, and profit by the discrepancy?"

"Ah," said Onslow, "so the new and valuable steamer, which, though over-insured, is likely to be reported lost, is evidently to have a consign-

ment of specie on board. £500,000 I fancy you mentioned as the figure in the billiard-room this morning. Well, if one is going in for robbery—or piracy, I suppose it would turn out to be in this instance—there's nothing like a large *coup*. It's your niggler who usually fails, and gets laid by the heels. Drive on, and be a little more explicit."

"Couldn't the steamer be lost somehow in the Gulf of Mexico, and a boat containing the boxes of specie find its way through this channel of yours into the interior of Florida?"

"How—lost?"

Mr. Shelf mopped his forehead again. "Don't steamers," he asked, "don't they sometimes have sad accidents which—which cause them to blow up?"

"Such things have been known. But it's rather rough on the crew, don't you think?"

"Oh, poor fellows, yes. But a sailor's life is always hazardous. Indeed, what can he expect with wages at their present ruinous rate? Ship-owners must live."

"Oh, you beauty!" said Patrick Onslow.

"I must ask you," cried Shelf with a sudden burst of sourness, "to refrain from these comments, sir. But tell me, before I go any further in this confidence, am I to count upon your assistance?"

“That depends upon many things. To begin with, there’ll have to be modifications before I dabble. I’m not obtrusively squeamish about human life—my own, or other people’s. On occasion I bagged my man—because he had twice shot at me. Still, piracy, complicated with what practically amounts to murder, is an art which I haven’t trafficked in as yet; and, curious to relate, I don’t intend to begin. Your scheme is delicious in its cold-bloodedness; but it would look better if it were toned down a trifle. By the way, better help yourself to a drink. Your nerves are in such a joggle, that I fancy you’ll faint if you don’t. I notice there’s no blue ribbon on your evening dress. Humph! That’s a second mate’s nip—four fingers, if it’s a drop; apparently you are used to this. Tell me now, what honorarium do you propose I should take for engineering this piece of rascality in your favor?”

“I will give you five hundred pounds!”

“Now, would you, really? Not even guineas?”

“Mr. Onslow, I’ll make it a thousand. There!”

“Mr. Theodore Shelf, when a monkey wants a cat to pull chestnuts for him out of the fire, he first has to be stronger than the cat. You don’t occupy that enviable position. In fact, I have the whip-hand of you in every way. We need

not particularize, but you can sum the items for yourself. Now I'll make you an offer. Half of all the plunder, and entire control of everything."

"Great heavens! do you want to ruin me?"

"I don't care in the least if I do. Your welfare doesn't interest me. But my services are on the market with a *prix fixé*, and you can take 'em or leave 'em. That's final."

Shelf burst into a torrent of expostulations; exciting himself more and more as he went on; till at last he stood before the other with gripped fists and the veins ridged out down his neck, inarticulate with fury.

Onslow heard him out with a contemptuous smile, but when the man had stormed himself into silence, then he spoke, coolly and coldly:

"When one trades in life and death, the brokerage is heavy. You have heard my offer. If you don't like it, say so without further palaver, and I'll leave you now—with your conscience, if you have a rag of such a commodity left."

"You may sit where you are," replied Shelf sullenly.

"Well and good. That means to say my terms are accepted. I'll pin you to them later. But for the present let me observe to you something else, so that there may be no misunderstanding between us. I've been rambling up and down

the world half my life, and I've met blackguards of most descriptions in every iniquitous place, from Callao to Port Saïd—forgers, thieves murderers of nearly every grade of proficiency. But they say that the prime of everything gets to London, and I verily believe now that it does, for by Jove, you are the most pernicious scoundrel of all the collection !”

“Sir !” thundered Shelf, “am I to listen to these foul insults in my own house ?”

“Oh, I quite understand the obligations of bread and salt ; but you are beyond the pale of that. You are a noxious beast who ought to be stamped out. Still you can be useful to me ; so I shall hire myself out to be useful to you. But I have brought these unpleasant facts under your notice, to let you thoroughly understand that I have summed you up from horns to hoofs, and to point out to you that I wouldn't give a piastre for your most sacred word of honor. We shall be bound to one another in this precious scheme by community of interests alone ; and if you can swindle me, you may. Only look out for the consequences if you do try it on. I never yet left a score unpaid. We're *Arcades ambo*—rascals both ; only we're different varieties of rascal. I know you pretty thoroughly ; and if you don't know me as well, possibly you will before we've done with one another. And now, if it please

you, we'll go into the minuter details of this piece of villainy, and sketch out definitely how we are to steal this half a million in specie, and this valuable steamer, without committing more murder than is absolutely essential to success."

CHAPTER VI.

THE TEMPTING OF CAPTAIN OWEN KETTLE.

"IF one might judge from the lacquered majesty of your office appointments," said Patrick Onslow, taking one of the big chairs in Shelf's inner sanctum, "your firm is doing a roaring fine business."

Mr. Theodore Shelf seated himself before his desk and began sorting out some papers. "The turnover," he said evasively, "is enormous. Our operations are most extensive."

"Extensive and peculiar," commented Onslow.

"But I regret to say that during the last eighteen months the firm's profits have seriously decreased, and the scope of its operations been much hampered. I take credit to myself that this diminution could have been prevented by no action on my part. It is entirely the outcome of the times, and the lazy greed of the working classes, fomented by the frothings of paid agitators. The series of strikes which we have had to contend against is unprecedented."

"Is it? Well, I don't know. There have been labor bothers all down through history, and I

fancy they'll continue to the end of time. If you'll recollect, there was a certain Egyptian king who once had troubles with his bricklayers, and I fancy there have been similar difficulties trotting through the centuries in pretty quick succession ever since. Of course, each man thinks his own employés the most unreasonable and grasping that have ever uttered opinion since the record began ; that's only natural. But I might point out to you that in definite results you aren't in the worst box yet. Your chariot hasn't been upset in the Red Sea so far, and it may be that a certain operation in the Mexican Gulf will grease up the wheels and set it running on triumphantly. Grumble if you like, Mr. Shelf, but don't make yourself out to be the worst-used man in history. Pharaoh hadn't half your opportunities."

"Yes, yes," said Shelf, who didn't relish this kind of conversation ; "but we will come to business, if you please."

"Right you are. Let's finish floating the swindle."

"Mr. Onslow !" exclaimed the other passionately, "will you never learn to moderate your language ? There are a hundred clerks within a hundred feet of you through that door, and sometimes even walls can listen and repeat. Besides, I object altogether to your phraseology. We engage in no such things as swindles in the

Tempting of Captain Owen Kettle. 57

City. Our operations are all commercial enterprises."

"Very well," said Onslow, shrugging his shoulders; "don't let's squabble over it. You call your spade what you like, only I reserve a right to clap on a plainer brand. We're built differently, Mr. Shelf. I prefer to be honest in my dishonesty. And now, as I've said, let's get to business. You say the charter of this steamer of yours, the *Port Edes*, has expired, and she is back on your hands. She's 2000 tons, built under Lloyds' survey, and classed 100 A1. She's well engined, and has just been dry-docked. She'll insure for every sixpence of her value without comment, and there's nothing more natural than to send out your specie in such a sound bottom. Remains to pick a suitable complement."

"I've got a master waiting here now by appointment. His name is Kettle. I have him to a certain extent under my thumb, and I fancy he will prove a reliable man. He was once in our firm's employment."

"Owen Kettle, by any chance?"

Mr. Theodore Shelf referred to a paper on his writing-table. "Captain Owen Kettle, yes. He was the man who lost the *Doge of Venice*, and since then he's never had another ship."

"Poor devil! yes, I know. That *Doge of Venice* case was an awful scandal. Owners filled up

the Board of Trade surveyor to the teeth with champagne, or she'd never have been passed to sea. As it was, she'd such an unholy reputation that two crews ran from her before they could get her manned. She was as rotten as rust and tumbled rivets could make her, and she was sent to sea as a coffin ship to earn her dividends out of Lloyds'. Kettle had been out of a job for some time. He was a desperate man, with a family depending on him, and he went as skipper, fully conscious of what was expected of him. He did it like a man. He let the *Doge of Venice* founder in a North Sea gale, and, by a marvelous chance, managed to save his ship's company. At the inquiry, of course, he was made scapegoat, and he didn't contrive to save his ticket. They suspended his master's certificate for a year. On the strength of that he applied to owners for maintenance, putting it on the reasonable claim of services rendered. Owners, being upright merchants and sensible men, naturally repudiated all knowledge or liability ; said he was a black-mailing scoundrel as well as an unskilful seaman ; and threatened him with an action for libel. Kettle, not having a solitary proof to show, did the only thing left for him to do, and that was eat dirt or subside. But the incident and the subsequent starvation haven't tended to sweeten his temper. Latterly he's been serving as mate

on a Pacific ship, and he was just a terror with his men. He simply kept alive by carrying his fist on a revolver-butt. There isn't a man who's served with Red Kettle three weeks that wouldn't have cheerfully swung for the enjoyment of murdering him."

"You appear to know a good deal about this man."

"When it suits my purpose," returned Onslow drily, "I mostly contrive to know something about anybody. However, it's no use discussing the poor beggar any longer. What's amiss with having him in now?"

Shelf touched one of the electric buttons which studded the edge of his table, and a clerk appeared, who went away again, and shortly returned. With him was a dried-up little man of about forty, with a red head and a peaked red beard, who made a stiff, nervous salaam to Mr. Theodore Shelf, and then turned to stare at Onslow with puckered amazement.

Onslow nodded and laughed. "Been carrying any more pilgrims from Port Saïd to the Morocco coast on iron decks?" he asked.

"I never did that," snapped Captain Kettle.

"Ah, one's memory fails at times. I dare say also you forget a water famine when the condenser broke down, and a trifling affray with knuckledusters and other toys; and a dash of

cholera; and nine dead bodies of Hadjis which went overboard? Perhaps, too, you don't remember fudging a clean bill of health, and baksheeshing certain officials of his Shereefian Majesty?"

"No," said Captain Kettle sourly, "I don't remember."

"I'm going to forget it also, if you'll prove yourself a sensible man, and deal amicably with Mr. Shelf and myself. I'm also going to forget that when you were shipping rice for Calcutta in '82 you rented mats you called your own to the consignor, and made a tidy penny out of that; and I shall similarly let slip from my memory a trifling squeeze of eight hundred dollars which you made out of a stevedore in New Orleans, before you let him touch your ship, in the fall of '82."

"You can't make anything out of those," said Kettle. "They're the ordinary customs of the trade."

"Shipmasters' perquisites for which owners pay? Exactly. I know some skippers consider these trifles to be their lawful right. But a court of law might be ignorant enough to set them down as robbery."

"I should like to know where you've got all these things from," Captain Kettle demanded, facing Onslow, with his lean scraggy neck thrust

forth nearly a foot from its stepping. "I should like to know, too, how you're here? I'd a fancy you were dead."

"Other people have labored under that impression. But I've an awkward knack of keeping alive. You've the same. The faculty may prove useful to us both in the course of the next month, if you're not ass enough to refuse £500."

"Ho! That's the game we've got bent, is it? What old wind-jammer do you want me to lose now?"

"Sir!" thundered Shelf, lifting his voice for the first time. "This is pretty language. I would have you remember that but a short time ago you were in my employ."

"And a fat lot of good it did me," retorted the sailor. "But," he added, with the sudden recollection that it is never wise of a master mariner to irritate any shipowner, "but, sir, I wasn't talking to you. I fancied it was Mr. Onslow here who was wanting to deal with me."

"Then your fancy carried you astray, captain," said Shelf. "Come, come, don't let's get angry with one another. As I repeatedly impress on all who come in contact with me, there is never any good born out of words voiced in anger. Mr. Onslow has seen fit to mention a few of your—shall I say—eccentricities, just to show—er—that we understand one another."

“To show he’s got his knife in me, Mr. Shelf, and can wrangle it if he chooses.”

“What a fractious pepper-box it is!” said Onslow, with a laugh. “Man, dear, if I’ve got to be shipmate with you for a solid month, d’ye think I’d put your back up more than’s necessary? If you remember me at all, you must know I’m the deuce of a stickler for my own personal comfort and convenience. You can bet I haven’t been talking at you through gratuitous cruelty. But Mr. Shelf and I have got a yarn to bring out directly, which is a bit of a coarse, tough-fibered yarn, and we didn’t want you to give it a top-dressing of varnish. So, by way of safeguard, I pointed out to you that if we show ourselves to be sinners, you needn’t sing out that you find yourself in evil company for the first time.”

Mr. Theodore Shelf had been shuffling his feet uneasily for some time. Onslow’s method of speech jarred him to the verge of profanity. His own saintliness was a garb which he never threw entirely away at any moment. His voice had always the oily drone of the conventicle. His smug hypocrisy was a perennial source of pride and comfort to him, without which he would have felt very lonely and abandoned.

At this point he drew the conversation into his own hands. It had been said of him that he always addressed the House of Commons as though

Tempting of Captain Owen Kettle. 63

he were addressing a congregation from the pulpit of his own tin tabernacle, and he preached out his scheme of plunder, violence, and other moral uncleanness with similar fervent unction. Onslow was openly amused, and once broke out into a mocking laugh. He was never at any pains to conceal his contempt for Mr. Theodore Shelf; which was more honest than judicious on his part.

Kettle, on the other hand, wore the puckered face of a puzzled man. The combination of cant and criminality was not altogether new to him. Men of his profession are frequently apt to behave like fiends unbooted at sea, and then grovel in clamorous piety amongst the pews of some obscure meeting-house during all their stay ashore. It is a peculiar trait; but many a sea-scoundrel believes that he can lay up a stock of fire insurance of this sort, which will comfortably see him through future efforts. In Kettle's mind, however, shipowners were a vastly different class of beings, and so it never occurred to him that the same might apply to them.

In this attitude Captain Kettle listened to the sermon which was reeled out to him, and rather gathered that the project he was exhorted to take part in was in some obscure manner a missionary enterprise promoted solely in the honor and glory of Mr. Theodore Shelf's own particular narrow little sect; and had Mr. Shelf made any appre-

ciable pause between his sonorous periods, Kettle would have felt it his respectful duty to slip in a humble "Amen." But the dictator of the great shipping firm was too fearful of interruptions from his partner to give any opening for a syllable of comment.

But if Captain Owen Kettle was unversed in the finer niceties of the art of hypocrisy, he was a man of angular common-sense ; and by degrees it dawned upon him that Mr. Shelf's project, when removed of its top-dressing of religion, was in its naked self something very different from what he had at first been drawn to believe.

As this idea grew upon him, the devotional droop faded from the corners of his lips, and his mouth drew to a hard, straight line, scarcely to be distinguished amongst the curving bristles of hair which surrounded it. But he made no interruption, and drank in every word till the speaker had delivered the whole of his say. Then he uttered his decision.

"So, gentlemen, you are standing in as partners over this precious business? And because you know me to be a poor broke man, with a wife and family, you naturally think you can buy me to work for you off the straight. Well, perhaps that's possible, but there are two ways of doing it, and of the two I like Mr. Onslow's best. When a man's a blackguard, it don't make him

Tempting of Captain Owen Kettle. 65

swallow any the sweeter for setting up to be a little tin saint. And I don't mind who I say that to."

"My good man," snarled Shelf, "do you mean to threaten me?"

"No, I don't. I just gave you my own opinion, as from man to man, just because I respect myself. But I'm not going round to your place of worship to shout it out to them that sit under you. They wouldn't believe me if I did. Not now at any rate. Besides, it wouldn't do me any good, and I couldn't afford it. I'm a needy man, Mr. Shelf, as you have guessed; and that's why I'm going to accept your offer. But don't let us have any misunderstanding between ourselves as to what it foots up to. What I'm going to sign on for directly, when you hand me the papers, is a spell of piracy on the high seas, neither more nor less. And I'm going to have my money all paid down in advance before I ring an engine-bell on your blasted tramp of a steamer. I guess that's fair enough. My family'll want something to go on with if I'm caught, because if one's found out at this game it's just a common ordinary hanging matter. Yes, sir, swing by the neck till I'm dead as an ax, and may Heaven have mercy on *your* miserable tag of a soul! That's what this tea-party means, and for your dirty £500 you're buying a live human man."

CHAPTER VII.

£500,000—IN GOLD.

THE little red-bearded man had gone, slamming the door noisily behind him. Shelf mopped his large white face with a scented pocket-handkerchief.

“Do you think,” he said nervously—“do you think we may trust him?”

“To begin with, we’ve got to now, whether we like it or not. He’s nothing to gain by playing traitor.”

“But would he betray us in case of success?”

“Perhaps,” said Onslow, “he won’t have the chance. Other hands on that steamer will have to share the secret in whole or in part. Perhaps they won’t all of them come through it alive. If you remember that we are plotting deliberate piracy on the high seas, you will recognize that there is precedent for a considerable percentage of casualties.”

The City man shuddered. Through the double windows came the sullen roar of a London street,

and in imagination he seemed to distinguish the howl of the crowd joined in execration against him.

His eye fell upon a paper on the desk. It was the formal notice from her bankers that his wife's account was heavily overdrawn. He lifted the paper, and tore it with his teeth; and then he smote the table with a shut fist, so that geysers flew from the inkwells. But his passion found no outlet in words. He spoke in his platform voice, and said nothing about the prime compelling force.

"We will not talk of these unpleasant details, if you please, Mr. Onslow. I—my heart is weak, I think, and they turn me sick. But at whatever cost, we must go through with the affair. It is necessary that I make a heavy *coup* within the next month, or the consequences may be disastrous."

"Marmaduke Rivers and Shelf will go down? Quite so. I'm also at the end of my cash balance, so that money seems to be the impelling power for each of us. But come now, wake up, sir, and let's get on with the business. I'm not so sweet on this City atmosphere of yours that I care to spend another morning down here if it can be avoided. How are you going to raise the specie?"

"I'll proceed about it at once," said Shelf,

pressing another of the buttons on his desk. "You may as well witness every step of the process."

In answer to the bell, Fairfax came into the room, nodded rather stiffly to Onslow, and turned to Shelf with an expectant: "Yes, Sir?"

In terse, business-like phrase his principal touched upon the silver crisis in America, and the gold famine in the Southern States. Then he explained the external view of his projected enterprise.

"The *Port Edes*," he said, "is in the Herculeum Dock, returned on our hands to-day. Wire Liverpool at once, asking for freights to Norfolk Virginia, Pensacola Florida, Mobile Alabama, or New Orleans, at lowest rates. New Orleans is her final port, and offer that at fifteen per cent. less. Captain Owen Kettle will be in command, and he sails in four days from this. When you have deputed your clerks to do this, go yourself to the bank and negotiate for half a million in gold, to be delivered on board the *Port Edes* in dock. The insurance policy on the money will be deposited with the bank to secure them in full for the loan itself, and for their other charges the credit of the house will easily suffice. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," said Fairfax; but I should like to remind you of one thing: wharf thefts at New

Orleans are notorious, and you'll have to pay heavily to insure against them."

"I know—more heavily than for risks across the ocean and the run up the river. Underwriters are justly nervous about those all-nation thieves. But in this instance I propose to save myself that fee, and insure in a different way. Mr. Onslow is going out on the *Port Edes* expressly as my representative, and I fancy that he and the captain together will be capable of seeing to safe delivery. The ship's arrival will be reported by telegraph from the pass at Mississippi Mouth, and my New Orleans agent can calculate her appearance alongside the levee to a quarter of an hour. He will meet her with vehicles and a strong escort of deputy-sheriffs as she brings in to her berth, and will take the specie-boxes off by the first gangway which is put ashore, and carry them straight to a bank. Does this strike you as a sound course?"

"Yes," said Fairfax thoughtfully; "I see no undue risks. By the way, as the *Port Edes* is merely a cargo tramp, and doesn't hold a certificate for passengers, I'm afraid the Board of Trade would not let Mr. Onslow travel by her simply as the firm's representative. But that could be easily overcome."

"Oh," said Onslow, "I'll sign on articles in the usual way as one of the ship's company—as fourth

mate, say, or doctor, with salary of one shilling for the run. 'Tisn't the first time that pleasing fiction has been palmed upon a shipping-master. It doesn't deceive any one you know, because the rate of wages gives one away at the outset. But the country's paternal, mutton-headed shipping laws are obeyed, and so everybody's pleased."

Fairfax laughed and went into the outer offices, and Patrick Onslow turned to the shipowner with a couple of questions.

"To begin with," he said, "why did you offer freights to Norfolk, and Pensacola, and Mobile, and those places? If you call in there, the natural thing would be to get the specie ashore and express it by railroad direct to New Orleans. If you miss that chance, and start carrying it round by sea, the thing looks fishy at once. Now, fishiness is an aspect which we can't afford in the very least degree. The swindle will call up enough sensation in its most honest and straightforward dress."

"My dear Mr. Onslow, please give me credit for a little more finesse. I see the objection to intermediate ports as much as you do, but I merely mentioned them to Fairfax as a blind. To begin with, it is a hundred to one chance against our getting any cargo at all consigned to them at this season of the year, even if we offered to carry it gratis. In the second place, if it was offered, I could easily get out of it in fifty ways. Afterwards,

when the deplorable accident takes place, an inquiry into this will help to draw off attention from your Floridan Peninsula. Any one inclined to carp will instantly be told that we were equally ready to put the specie ashore on the Virginian coast if our other cargo had led us there. What do you think of that now?"

"Beg your pardon. That's clear-sighted enough, and should work correctly. But I fancy my other objection is better founded. What in the name of plague did you go and economize over insurance for? Why didn't you get the stuff underwritten slap up to the strong-room of the bank?"

"To save £500. If you aren't going past the middle of the Mexican Gulf, what is the use of wasting money by insuring further?"

"£500 in a deal of £500,000! A mere straw in a cartload!"

"That, my dear Mr. Onslow, is business. As I often assure my young friends commencing life, if one takes care of the pennies, the pounds will take care of themselves. It is by looking after what you are pleased to consider trivial sums like these that the firm of Marmaduke Rivers and Shelf has risen to its present eminence."

"Oh, wind!" retorted Onslow. "Don't tell me!"

"Sir!" exclaimed Shelf.

"Well, if you will have it, the eminence appears

to be uncommon tottery, and because of your miserable meanness you're doing your best to bring it over. It's just trifles like this that tell. Consider what will happen after the catastrophe. There'll be an inquiry that will lay everything bare down to the very bed-plates. Do you think they won't jump on this point at once? The stuff is fully insured up to New Orleans ; it isn't insured on the levee, and in the streets, where the thefts are notorious. Doesn't this drop an instantaneous hint that it was never intended to get so far?"

"No," said Shelf sourly. "I don't see that it does."

"Then," retorted Onslow, "I differ from you entirely ; and as I'm to be the active agent in this affair, and have to take the first and gravest physical risk, I do not choose to have my retreat unnecessarily hampered. I must insist upon your recalling Fairfax for additional instructions. What extra insurance has got to be paid."

"Then pay it yourself," angrily exclaimed Mr. Shelf.

"That's outside the bargain. Working expenses are your contribution to the partnership. And besides, for another thing, I couldn't plank down that money if I wished. I haven't it in the world."

"Mr. Onslow, I believe you. Will you extend the same courtesy to me when I tell you that if I

were to attempt raising even such a trivial sum as £500 to-day it would precipitate me into bankruptcy to-morrow."

"Whew! Are you nipped as badly as all that?"

"I have a remorseless drain on me which drinks up the profits of this business like a great sponge. It is a domestic drain, and I cannot resist it."

"You poor beggar!" said Onslow, with the first scrap of sympathy he had yet shown to his partner. "I believe I understand, and it tones down your dingy color. You aren't quite all black. I believe by your own painting you're only a moderate sort of gray. And if I've been beastly rude and hard with you, because I've considered you a soapy scoundrel playing entirely for your own hand, I'll apologize to you. That isn't in the least polite, but I think it's plain, and perhaps we shall get on together better now. But about this bankruptcy. It'll be rather a mess if you go smash before our Florida operation realizes its profits. It will thicken the inquiry, you know, to a very unpleasant keenness."

"I think I shall keep on my feet, Mr. Onslow. I trust, I pray I shall; and, moreover, I thank you for what you have said. I do confess that your manner of speech has wounded me much at times."

"Oh, as to that," returned Onslow, "I mostly say 'spade' when I mean it, and I don't care to

mix religion with theft, when I'm talking with a co-conspirator. But I fancy we understand one another more comfortably now, and I'll leave you to make the rest of the arrangements here in London. This afternoon I'll pick up Kettle and run down to Liverpool and get things in hand there. They'll require care. To begin with, there's a suitable armament to be smuggled on board without advertisement. And there are other nefarious preparations to be made. Piracy on the high seas is not a thing to be undertaken lightly nowadays; nor is murder."

"Oh, heavens!" cried Shelf, "don't speak of these horrors."

"I speak of them," replied Onslow grimly, "because it is right that you should understand what will probably be done. I don't intend to redden my fingers if it can be avoided; but as I put my neck in jeopardy, failure or no failure, I naturally don't intend to hesitate at any action which will bring unqualified success. Only understand fully, Mr. Theodore Shelf, that piracy you are already an active sharer in, and if there's murder done to boot, you will be as guilty as the worst, even though you sit here in your snug London offices whilst other rougher men are handling pistol and knife in the Gulf or in a Floridan mangrove swamp."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SEND-OFF.

THE *Port Edes* had gained the name of an unlucky ship. She had slain three men in her building; she had crushed another to death the day before she left the slips; and, though only three years in the water, she had already maimed enough hands from various crews to make her a full complement. Some vessels are this way; from no explainable cause there seems to be a diabolic fatality about them.

It is not to be supposed that sailormen rush to join a craft of this sinister reputation. Although they are called asses in the bulk, they are only asses in part. They always try for the best berths first. But because there are not enough of these to go round; and because, thanks to the Dago and the Dutchman, there are not sufficient berths of any sort whatever to supply all aspirants; it is always possible to man any vessel which a Board of Trade official will pass through a dock gates.

Just as no man is ever successful in anything without due cause, so *per contra* few sailormen

are down on their luck except through some peculiar trait of incapacity. So that on your unpopular ship, be she tramp-steamer, or eke weeping wind-jammer, you do not get much pick of a crew. You have to put up with what other people have left, and it does not take you long to learn that your beauties have not been rejected for their excellences.

It was this way on the *Port Edes*. Forward and aft, engine-hold and pantry, each man on board of her had his private sea-failings. Between them they lacked wakefulness, eyesight, decision, strength of fist, strength of language, seamanship, and common sobriety. Amongst the deckhands there were virulent sea-lawyers; in the stokeholds there was *âmes damnées* wanted by several Governments. The engineers were skilful in gaining the smallest possible knottage per ton of coal; the mates were all slipshod navigators, untrustworthy even to correct a compass and useless to drive a truculent crew.

Over all was Owen Kettle, master mariner. Whatever his failings might be (and the index of them tailed out), they did not show prominently at the head of such a ship's company. Like all men in the merchant marine, he had been bred in the roughest school; but, unlike his successful brethren, he had not graduated later on to the smooth things of a well-manned passenger liner.

For his sins he had remained the pitiful knock-about skipper, a man with knife-edged words always ready on the lip of his teeth, a leaden whistle in one jacket-pocket, and a lethal weapon in the other. He was an excellent seaman and navigator—a man capable of going an entire voyage without taking off his clothes or enjoying one watch of regular sleep. Whilst in command at sea, he credited himself with the powers of a Czar, and was entirely unscrupulous in gaining ends which expediency or his owners laid down for him; and though not physically powerful, he had the pluck of a dog, and an unholy reputation for marksmanship. Taking into allowance these qualifications, it may be understood that for the handling of such a menagerie of all-nation scoundrelism and incapacity as bunked in the s. s. *Port Edes*, no better man than Owen Kettle breathed in either hemisphere.

The crew signed their marks on the articles at the shipping office in the Sailors' Home, and went off grumbling to get rid of their advances. Later, most of them turned up on the steamer; some with their worldly goods done up in dunnage sacks (which look to the uninitiated like pillow-slips); some apparently possessing nothing but the squalid raiment they stood up in. There was not one of them dressed like a sailor, according to the conventional idea, yet most of them had

made their bread upon the seas since early boyhood, which shows what conventional ideas are sometimes worth. They were most of them oldish men, and looked even older than their years.

The engineers came on board early, for the most part in scrubby blue serge, and sour black temper. They grumbled at the mess-room in broad Glaswegian, prophesied evil (in advance) about the capacities of the mess-room steward and the ship's cook, dumped their belongings into their various rooms, and changed to apparel more suitable for tail-twisting in the unclean regions below. Then they went on duty, quarreled with the donkeyman who was making steam for the winches, and proceeded to split up their crew of firemen and trimmers into watches, and apportion them to furnace doors and bunkers.

The three mates, the boatswain, and the carpenter were also on board betimes, most of them large-headed with recent libations, and feeling cantankerous accordingly. There was a small general cargo being shipped for New Orleans, and it gave these worthy officers ease to find occasional acid fault with the stevedore's crew or the crane men on the wharf; but, for the most part, they shuffled about the decks in easy slippers, attending to the various ship duties in massive sneering silence.

Patrick Onslow came into the chart-house on the bridge-deck, closing the door behind him. "A cheery, amiable crowd you've collected," he said.

"Aren't they?" replied Captain Kettle from a sofa locker. "They're just a terror of a crew. You wait till we get to sea, and they start on mischief. My mate's a cur; he wouldn't stand up to a Chinaman. And the rest of the after-guard is much of a pattern—picked that way on purpose. Oh, I tell you, Mr. Onslow, that I stand alone, and I shall have my hands full. But let 'em start, the brutes. I'll haze them. It isn't a new sort of tea-party, this, with me."

"You're going into it with your eyes open, anyway."

"Oh don't you make any error, sir," said Kettle. "I know my job. And if I warn you, it's because you'll see things for yourself, and perhaps join in at them. I don't go and tell everybody. Not much. They think ashore I've got a real soft thing on this time. Why, do you know, Mr. Onslow," he added, with a thin, sour grin, "my old woman wanted to come with me for the trip. She said it was so long since she's had a whiff of outside air, that now I'd such a tidy steamboat under me, she couldn't miss the chance. Yes, sir; and she said she'd bring one of the kids with her that wanted to be a sailor, like his daddy! I

tell you, she was that took on the idea she'd hear no refusal ; and I had to write a letter to owners, and get them to wire back a 'No ' she could read for herself. It'd look well set to music, that tale, wouldn't it? Sort of jumpy music, you know, with a yo-heave-humbug chorus to it, same as all sailors' songs have that you hear in the halls."

Onslow shrugged his shoulders. "What can you expect at the price?" he asked. "This isn't a twelve-pound-a-month berth ; and you've threshed across the Atlantic in a worse ship for less."

"Don't you mistake me," retorted Kettle. "I'm working for full value received ; and there's many an old sailor'd like to be in my shoes, if he only knew. I'm not grumbling at the berth, only when a man's on a racket of this kind, it's a bit hard on him to have a wife and kids he's fool enough to be fond of. It's an ugly amusement, lying to them like a play actor, when you know it's ten chances to one you'll never see English mud again. That's the way it cuts, though I suppose you'll think it all a sailor's grumble. Perhaps you aren't a married man?"

"No ; I'm not."

"But you've got people who care for you?"

Onslow gave the ghost of a smile, and then laughed. "No," he said, "I can't even boast of that. Acquaintances are mine in thousands ; but

friends—well, all friendship has its breaking strain. I'm a bit like that comfortable, contemptible person, the Miller of the Dee. I believe I did care for somebody once; and she made me think she cared for me. Probably she lied, because, under persuasion, she went off with another man. Bah! though, what does it matter? Kettle, we're talking rank sentiment, and that's an unprofitable employment for men engaged on a piece of delicate business. And—here's a gentleman come to tell me that the consignment of specie is just commencing to arrive. Now, captain, the stuff'll be in iron-bound boxes, and you and I have got to weigh each one separately, and check the invoice. Then we're to act as our own stevedores, and stow half of it in the cabin next my room, and half of it across the alley-way next the mate's."

"Why divide it?"

"Because the weight is big, and it would give your steamer a heavy list to starboard."

"Oh, as to that, never mind. We can easily bring her up again with a trimming tank; and I shouldn't feel comfortable if any of the stuff was in that room next the mate's. You see, Mr. Onslow, any one on board can go down that alley-way. In fact, it's the only road from end to end of the ship, unless you go up over the bridge deck. And I'd not guarantee but what the bait

wouldn't make some of them beauties try and tamper with the door. It's big enough to smudge the honesty of an archbishop, if he was only earning four pounds a month. Now, the room next yours has iron walls, and opens only into the inner cabin. There's a good lock on it already, and if I make the carpenter bend on four more, you'll have a strong-room the Bank of England might boast about."

"That sounds sensible," commented the envoy from the bank.

"Very well," said Onslow, "I believe it is the best plan. Now, if you please, we'll have the weighing-machine in the main cabin, and if you, sir, will instruct your men to bring in the boxes one by one, I'll satisfy myself that they agree with the tally, and Captain Kettle shall build them up in the state-room before us both. It's a very responsible job we have upon us, and the more counter-checkings and precautions we can put into it the better for our several reputations."

It was a responsible job. Not every day is specie to the tune of half a million British sovereigns shipped from a Liverpool dock; and because gold-boxes are made in a conventional pattern, the shipment was spotted, and crowds gathered to stare at the cased-in wealth.

As staring dumbly is dry work, self-appointed

orators amongst the crowd naturally distributed gratis their own private opinions upon the situation; and, according to their luck or eloquence, these attracted larger or smaller audiences. No one took them very seriously, and they for the most part treated the subject in a jocular vein. It was not till Captain Kettle and the Mersey pilot had gone on to the upper bridge, and the mate on the fore-deck had cast off the first bow-fast, that a prophet arose who spoke of the gold shipment in another key.

He was a wild, unkempt, knock-kneed man, who attracted first attention by tying a crimson handkerchief to an umbrella and brandishing it above his head. Being on the face of him a creature who never, if he could avoid it, put his hand to honest labor, he naturally addressed the crowd at large as "Fellow workers." These things awoke a slight humorous interest; and because the man had the gift of glib and striking speech, the crowd continued to listen after the first pricking up of their ears.

The man's discourse need not be reported in detail. He was an anarchist, red, rampant, and ruthless; and by means of arguments, some warped, some fair enough, he pointed out to his hearers that the mission of the *Port Edes* was another knife-thrust of capital into the ribs of labor. The statement met with a very mixed

reception, but the anarchist silenced both the jeers and the applause with a beseeching wave of his hand, and followed along the curb of the wharf the steamer, which was commencing to float towards the dock gates. He spoke to those on board her now rather than to his more immediate following, and unclean faces stared at him from over the line of bulwarks.

"To any man of you who values life," he cried, "I offer a solemn warning. That ship is doomed; she will sink in mid-ocean, blown apart by our petards, and her ill-gotten cargo will be hurled out of capital's reach forever. Those who are misguided enough to be her guardians will be blown into space. Listen, you men of her crew. Jump on the pierhead yonder as she passes into the basin, and take the consequences. The brutal laws of this country will hurl you into prison; but better a season dragging out a martyr's sentence, than death as an enemy to the workers' cause."

At this point the strong right hand of the law descended on to the speaker's elbow; and then, because he attempted to resist, the willing right knee of the law jerked up suddenly into the small of that anarchist's back; after which he was haled ignominiously to a police-station, and the place of his speaking knew him no more.

But the fellow's threats had not been without

their result. Every hand on the *Port Edes*' deck had heard them distinctly, and disquiet arose under the belts of nine out of ten. The mates grew nervous and the men inattentive; and, from the bridge, Captain Kettle's voice and whistle kept ringing out with biting clearness. As it was, only one man attempted to put the warning into practical effect. He was a miserable, half-clad wretch, a coal-trimmer by rating, already repentant of the spell of physical toil which he had signed on for.

Passing through the lock-gates into the basin, the steamer's port quarter swung gently towards the wall. A sailor, in readiness, dropped from above and ran aft with the lanyard of a cork fender. The trimmer jumped on the bulwarks, and one might have thought that he was going to bear a hand—an unnecessary hand. The sailor did so, and cursed him for his officiousness. The donkeyman, however, who was oiling the after-winch, had other ideas on the subject, and stood by for a rush. So it befell when that trimmer was getting himself ready for a spring back on the quay-head, the donkeyman's long legs took him rapidly across the red iron decks, and when the trimmer was already in mid-air, the donkeyman's huge paw descended upon the slack of his black breeches, and drew him back as though he possessed the weight of a feather pillow. Whereat

the crowd at the pier-head yelled with delighted laughter, and the dingy steamer made her way stolidly on to the muddy waters of the Mersey ebb, which bubbled against the lip of the walls beyond.

"Curse you!" snarled the trimmer, "what's that for?"

"Because we're short-manned in the stokehold already, me son; an' if there's a hand goes, it's meself that'll have to stand watch and watch in his place. Havin' got you, I shall be a jintleman now, and slape in my bed at night all the way to New Orleans. See that?"

"This mucky old tramp'll be blowed up sure's death, and I shall be killed."

"Well, bless me!" retorted the donkeyman; "who'd miss you if you was killed—always supposing you weren't wanted for our furnaces? Here, get up, you half-baked scum of the workhouse, and tumble below. Thank your stars the old man hasn't seen you from the bridge. But don't give me any more of your lip, or I'll report you to him and the chief to boot. Now, *mosey*."

The coal-trimmer blew his nose on his gray neck-handkerchief, and shambled off below, muttering. The donkeyman returned to his winch, unbent the chain, and sent it down into the adjacent hold. Then he retired to the poop deck-house, where he lived with the carpenter and boatswain,

and offered to bet those worthies (who had just come in for dinner) that Captain Kettle shot some one on board before the *Port Edes* tied up against New Orleans levee.

“He’s a just holy terror, our old man,” observed the donkeyman cheerfully. “I sailed with him once before, and he unbent a quartermaster’s front teeth with the bridge telescope before we were three days out. With the smudgy crowd we’ve got here now, it’s a pound to a brick they start him moving, even sooner than that. Not that I mind myself. Sea’s dull enough as a general thing, and I like to see a bit of life throwing about. And at that game, little Red Kettle’s good as a Yankee skipper any day.”

CHAPTER IX.

GROUND-BAIT.

FOR reasons, the *Port Edes* took the "North about" course; that is, she headed across south of the Banks of Newfoundland nearly to Cape Hatteras, and then braved the three-knot current of the Gulf Stream by passing down the Florida Channel on the western side of the Bahamas. They had carried good weather with them—light head breezes or calms—all the way; and, although coals were dear and the day's outlay was limited to twenty-eight tons by order, the steamer usually averaged ten and a half knots, despite the unskillfulness of the engine-room staff.

In a canvas chair on the bridge deck under the lee of the fiddley sat Patrick Onslow, with a pipe between his teeth and Pierre Loti's "*Fantôme d'Orient*" in his lap. He was distinctly idling. For the moment he was wondering how, from so transparently blue a sea, the spray which jumped from the wave-crests could be colorless and opaque. Then, by following with the eye a tangle of

yellow Gulf weed which floated past, his attention was carried away to some little gray spouts of fog, which told of whales and their calves taking a summer outing in the milk-warm waters of the south. Beyond, his eyes fell upon one of the screw-pile lighthouses with which the United States Government has fringed the Florida shoal; and on the far horizon sprouted the wind-threshed tops of some scattered cabbage palms, which told that there at least the shallow sea was sea no more. At the back of these palms lay the mysterious shelter of the Everglades.

A thought passed through Patrick Onslow's mind, a thought of the drama to be played under shelter of those recesses within the next few days, and he frowned. He thrust the thought from him as an impertinence, and turned again to his novel. But he was destined just then to read no more from that dainty vignette of Stamboul. Through the grating of the fiddley above his head came a frightened shout; then a chorus; then a prolonged clattering, as iron tools were thrown on the floor-plates, and the boots of scared men smote the rungs of the ladders.

Onslow gave a quick smile to himself, as though he understood something; then mounted a look of concern on his face, and, getting up from his chair, crossed to port and strode up to the break of the bridge-deck. The captain, coming out of

the chart-house, joined him. From the door of the alley-way beneath them rushed a crowd of frightened men—trimmers and stokers, stripped to the waist, engineers in dungaree—all the human contents of the lowest hold. Kettle singled out the Chief with his eye, and addressed him with sour irony—

“ ‘Afternoon, Mr. McFee. Fine, isn’t it, for the time of year? Have your curs forgotten that they’re paid to work this steamboat up Mississippi River to a city called New Orleans? Or have they induced the other watch to go below and give them a spell? ”

“ Guid God, sir, dinna jest! ” replied the Chief.

“ Ye remember what yon scoundrel said on Liverpool dock wall? Weel, he’s been as guid as his words, sir. We’ve found an infernal machine already.”

“ Well? ” drawled Kettle.

“ Man, we may be blown to the sea-floor any minute.”

“ Sea whisky ! sea grandmother ! ”

“ Man, sir, see wi’ your own een. By God’s guid mercy the donkeyman picked it from among the coals, or it’s no knowin’ where we’d bin this blessed moment ! ”

“ Hand it up here,” the skipper commanded shortly.

The burly donkeyman, half grinning, half

afraid, came up the iron steps and handed the captain a box painted to look like a knob of coal.

"It was ticking when I picked it up, sir," he said, "but when I handled it, the ticking stopped."

The captain took the thing in his hand. It started on a fresh *cluck, cluck*, and the grimy men on the iron decks below humped their shoulders as though to better receive a blow, and began to shuffle away towards the bows.

"Oh, it may be something dangerous," said Captain Kettle, and he hove his burden over the side, "or it mayn't. Looked to me like a toy to frighten flats. There's only one man with the pluck of a' roach amongst you, and here's half-a-crown for him."

The donkeyman's black forefinger knuckled his greasy cap.

"As for the rest, your mothers must have suckled you on pigeons' milk, and then sent you to a girls' school to dry-nurse. You pack of beauties! Oh, you cowardly, bobby-hunted gems! If the thing was found, well, found it was, and the donkeyman brought it on deck. What do you want to foul the clean air for with your dingy, stinking carcasses before your watch was out? I'll log every man of you for this; yes, Mr. McFee, and Mr. Second, and Mr. Third, I'll dirty your tickets for you as well, and if you give me another ounce of bother I'll take care you

none of you ever get another berth so long as the universe holds water to carry shipping. You cowardly hounds! Oh, you trust me!"

The men slunk back into the alley-way again out of shot of the skipper's tongue, and the engineers, plucking up courage first, led the way below. Some one clattered a shovel on a firebar. Instinct made the trimmers obey the signal, and they went to the bunkers. The firemen followed, and the steam-gauge remounted before it had received any appreciable check. It was all an affairs of five minutes.

Kettle passed a forefinger round the inside of his shirt-collar, and strolled across with Onslow to where the deck-chairs straddled in the shade of the fiddley. "They're a holy crew, aren't they?" said the master of the *Port Edes*.

"I think they're what we want. We should be rather out of it with a plucky lot who insisted on standing by us at a pinch."

"Oh, don't you make any error about that," replied Kettle. "They'd have been shaky anyway, but this bogus clockwork devil of yours fixes them to a nicety. It'll be every Jack for himself when the scare comes, and Davy Jones take the steamer, and the others. Oh, they'll run like a warren of rabbits. The brutes!"

Kettle broke off abruptly, and stared moodily over the Gulf Stream. A flying-fish got out of

the blue water and ran across the ripples like a silver rat. A school of porpoises snorted leisurely up from astern, and passed the steamer as though she had been at anchor. And the tangles of the gulf-weed floated past like reefs of tawny coral.

"Do you ever read poetry?" the skipper suddenly asked.

Onslow slewed round his head and stared. The idea of this vinegar-mouthed little savage talking of poetry very nearly made him break into wild laughter. With an effort he steadied his face and said quietly, "Sometimes."

"I'm glad of that. Somehow I hadn't dared ask you before, but now I know, Mr. Onslow, I like you all the better. It gives us something in common we can talk about without being ashamed. We can't very well discuss the other matter which binds us together and respect ourselves at the same time."

"Quite right. You and I, captain, are shouldered to common piracy by the force of circumstances; but I always kick myself when I think about it. There's no glamour of romance about our intended villainy, or the way it's being led up to."

"Not a bit. Byron wrote about piracy, but Byron was no seaman, and he didn't know what hazing a crew meant. A thief's a dirty scoun-

drel all the world over, and always has been; and a sea thief, having the scum of the earth to handle, has to make himself the cruelest brute on earth if he wants to succeed. I think it's that which put me out of liking with Byron and all those poets who've written about movement at sea. They give a wrong idea of men's motives and actions, and when they get talking on shop, they're that inaccurate and absurd they make one tired. No, Mr. Onslow, give me a land poet, who talks about farms, and primroses, and tinkling brooks, and things he understands, and with that man I can sit through two watches on end. Reading him may make me feel low, but it doesn't do a man harm to be that way sometimes. Ye see, Mr. Onslow, a scuffle, or a row with a mutinous crew, is just meat and drink to me. Yes, sir, that's the kind of brute I am."

They chatted and basked during the rest of the afternoon, whilst the two mates off watch painted ironwork, and the crew off duty grumbled and smoked and slept in the stuffy fore-castle. The cabin tea came. Kettle, at the head of the table, preserved a sour silence, and Onslow and the mates carried amongst them a strained civility. And then skipper and supernumerary officer returned to their canvas chairs beside the fiddley on the bridge-deck.

The Gulf Stream rippled crisply over the

steamer's wake astern, and the small wavelets of a calm licked the yellow rust-stains which patched her sweeping flank. Before them the narrow sea was the color of a dull blue roofing-slate. The bright, hot day had faded; the brilliant cobalt had filtered away from overhead, and a silver nail-paring of moon peered from a sky of amorphous violet, still lighted in its higher flats by the sun's after-glow.

On the horizon line was what at first appeared to be a steamer's smoke, but what the glass showed to be the reek of a fire on the invisible, low-lying Florida coast. No blaze-glow could be seen. It might be a fisher's camp-fire on an outlying key; it might be a game-driving of Seminole Indians beyond the explored coast-fringe, in that unknown tangle of trees and grasses and lagoons, the Everglades themselves.

"It's worth living, Mr. Onslow, times like these," said Kettle, when they had sat there in silence till the warm night had spread all over, and the white stars were beginning to show in multitudes through its gaps.

The other nodded, sucking at his cold pipe. "None of those poets have ever put all this down on paper. They've got parts—bits—but not all. I fancy it is because they haven't seen the thing for themselves. I've tried myself, but I haven't made much account of it."

"What, you—you're a poet?" Onslow rapped out.

"I knock off a bit of verse occasionally," said the skipper complacently. "When I'm in the mood, that is. It generally comes times like this—when I've been tail-twisting the hands, and have a spell of a rest and a think afterwards."

"I see—the outcome of the vivid contrast," said Onslow. He imagined to himself that these boasted poems would be of the "heroic" order, to the verge of melodrama. As it happened, he could not conveniently have made a worse guess. Kettle lugged from his pocket a doubled-up exercise-book, reddened slightly under the tan, and handed it across. His companion flattened out the crease, and, in the light which came from a chart-house port, dipped into the manuscript verses for himself. To his astonishment, they were one and all sonnets and ballads which might well have been written by a sentimental schoolgirl. They breathed of love and devotion and premature fading away, and at least three gushing adjectives qualified each tender noun.

There was no word about the sea, on which their author had spent his life, or of the things of the sea, with which he had had all his dealings. He knew about these as few men did, but they seemed common to him, and unclean. Conse-

quently he had delivered himself of an ode to that Spring which he had never witnessed ashore, and love songs to ladies he had never met outside the covers of cheap fiction. It was all imagination, and untutored, uninspired imagination at that.

As a result, Onslow found the poems too killingly funny for words, and was consumed with a wild desire for laughter; but, with that red-bearded little savage, their maker, glaring anxiously at him from the opposite shadow, he dare not let so much as the tail of a smile dance from the corner of his mouth. He had to enjoy and endure in silence; and, with the exercise-book thrust out to the yellow light-stream, he read on through the stanzas diligently.

In one, evidently autobiographical, the writer spoke of himself as a "timid frail gazelle," in another he addressed his remarks from the mouth-piece of a "coy and cooing turtle-dove," to a "sylphlike maiden of haughty mien," who, at the time of the narration, was the "bewitching, entrancing, unparalleled queen" of another gentleman's hearth. An "Ode to Excellence," which commenced "Hairy Alfred, brother bard," was evidently directed at a contemporary; but the past was cared for in "Cleopatra, a lament," which a footnote stated could be sung to the tune of "Greenland's Icy Mountains."

Probably as a collection Captain Kettle's was unique in its clumsy, maudlin sentiment, and its general unexpectedness.

Meanwhile the author was fidgeting nervously. He had not got over that initial nervousness which publication gives. He hungered for a criticism—favorable if possible. At last he made bold to ask for it.

"You're a wonderful man, Kettle," returned his companion, quite meaning what he said; "and unless I had seen those verses for myself, I'd never have believed you capable of producing them, no matter what had been told me about your powers."

The poet gave a sigh of relief, and was going to pursue the subject further, when something fell upon his ear which turned his thoughts into a very different key.

"By James! there's the engine stopped. What's up now, I wonder?"

He jumped to his feet, and stood with neck craned out, listening. The ring of heavy boots made itself heard on the engine-room ladders. Then there was a murmur of voices and a pattering of footsteps from the forecastle, and presently a stream of men began to ascend the bridge-deck ladders. Amongst the growing babel of voices came references to the gold: "Half a million yellow sovereigns, boys!" and threats there

was no mistaking. "Teach the old man manners, or put him over the side!"

By an evident previous arrangement the men were massing themselves on the port side of the bridge deck.

"Mutiny, by James!—that's what this means!" commented Captain Kettle in an undertone.

He was cool as ice, and on the moment had decided how to act.

"Now, Mr. Onslow, slip into the chart-house for your pistol. I have mine in my pocket. It's us two against the crowd of 'em, and we'll finish out top side. Oh, don't you make any error; it'll be a red night's work for those dogs. But we'll rub the fear of death into them before we've done this time—into those that are left, that is. Get your pistol, quick, sir, and skin your eye for handy shooting!"

CHAPTER X.

MUTINY.

PATRICK ONSLOW came out of the chart-house with all the armament he could lay hands upon ; to wit, three revolvers. He gave one to the Captain and put the others in his own jacket pocket, so that they had a brace apiece. From the other side of the bridge-deck the clamor of the men rose high into the night ; and the steamer's fore-truck began to swing past the stars. Her engines had stopped, the quartermaster had deserted the wheel, and the Gulf Stream was taking her as simple flotsam whither it listed.

There was no starboard ladder to the upper bridge, but Kettle swung himself lightly up by a funnel-stay and a stanchion, and climbed over the canvas dodger. Onslow followed as nimbly. The mate of the watch received them with a frightened sidelong glance, but no words ; and then he vanished into the darkness.

Captain Owen Kettle stumped cheerfully across to the port side of the bridge and looked down. Beneath him, massed and moving, was apparently every man of his crew. The electric

lamp from inside the head of the companion-way blazed full upon them, dazzling some of the group, and blinding the others with dense black shadow. With folded arms he looked down on them for a full minute, with a silent, sneering laugh, till the upturned faces, which had been quiet in expectation, began to grow clamorous again. Then he waved them to noiselessness, and spoke.

The man's words were not conciliatory. He addressed his hearers as dogs, and wished to know, in the name of the Pit, why they had dared to leave their duties and their kennel to come to sully his bridge-deck.

The harangue was brief and beautifully to the point. An ordinary seaman stood out into the middle of the circle of light, and made reply: "You gall us togs, und you dreat us as togs, und we're nod going to schtandt it no longer. This grew temants its rechts!"

"Hallo!" said Kettle, "got a blooming Dutchman to speak for you? Well, you must be a hard-up crowd! See here now, if you do want to talk, have your say, and be done with it. English is the official language on this ship; understand that, and don't waste my time."

The German seemed inclined to bluster and hold his ground, but he had no backers.

"If you're undecided," suggested Captain Ket-

tle, "you've got a nigger amongst you; why not set him on to talk? If you were men, I wouldn't say it; but he's as much a man as any of you, and perhaps he'll throw in a sand-dance to enliven proceedings."

The negro, from somewhere on the outskirts of the crowd, broke into a loud guffaw, till some one kicked him on the shins, and sent him away yelping *diminuendo* into the farther darkness. An angry growl went up from the white men at the taunt, and one of them, a whiskered quartermaster in a cardigan jacket, stepped out and spat into the circle of light. He looked round to catch the encouraging glances of his mates, and then lifted up his face towards the upper bridge. "See here, Captain Kettle, you'd better not try us-too far. This isn't a slave ship you're commanding. It's a common, low-down, British tramp; and the law looks after the deck-hands and all the rest of us."

"Now that's fair speaking," said Kettle. "I've a profound respect for the Merchant Shipping Act and all the rest of the laws. My lad, if you fancy you've anything to complain of, a sea-lawyer like you must know the remedy. Get your witnesses and go with them before the British Consul in New Orleans."

"A fat lot of good that would do," retorted the man. "What consul ever believed an old sailor

against the skipper? No, sir; we'd only get penitentiary for our pains. Besides, what we want—and what we intend to have—is an alteration in things, beginning now.”

“Ah! I see. And what would you like? Shall I have a hold cleared out and fit up with four-post beds for you to make a drawing-room of? Shall I order my steward to handiced pop round to the gentlemen who are heavin' coals in the stokehold? Come now, out with it!”

The little captain was deliberately irritating the men, and Onslow marveled at his recklessness. Once let an outbreak start, and he and Kettle stood not one chance in a million of living through it. But Kettle knew his game, and was playing it well.

Only one man laughed, and his laugh closed up again in a moment like the snap of a watch. Some scowled, a few swore; the quartermaster in the cardigan jacket alone remained unmoved. Of Kettle's outrageous raillery he took no notice whatever, but continued his plaint in a solid monotone, as though he had been reading it from a book.

“In the first instance, it's the grub we complains of, partic'ly the sugar. It ain't sugar at all; it's just a slump of molasses.”

“That,” said Kettle, “is due to your own laziness. The bottom of a sugar barrel's always that

way unless you turn it end for end every day or so. The molasses 'd settle through the Queen's sugar at Windsor and spoil half of it unless the barrel was looked to. By James!" he continued, with a first show of fury, is it for this you dogs have turned yourselves into a howling pack of mutineers, and let my ship drift like a hen-coop towards Newfoundland?"

The quartermaster was obviously disconcerted by the attack, so much so, in fact, that he missed the next few counts of his indictment, and came at once to the main head.

"It's a rise of wages that we insists on principally," he said. "We take it we've been signed on for this run to New Orleans under false pretenses. Nothing was said about the sort of cargo we was to carry, which, naturally, incites them anarchist chaps to vi'lence. We're suffering undue risks. There's been one devil machine found already, and as like as not there is others besides. The bloomin' ole tramp may go up any minute; and because we're standing that risk, we say we ought to be paid accordin'. The cargo can stand the pull, and if you aren't willing, the hands here has made up their minds to broach it for themselves."

Kettle did not answer at once. He seemed to be twisting words over and over in his mouth, and then gulping them down his throat and bring-

ing up others. It was a full minute before the man found speech, but then it came from him in a torrent. "You great fools!" he cried, "this isn't an ordinary cargo that you can help yourselves out of, and let the underwriters stand treat. You bet the tallyman won't wink at any yarn about 'damaged in transit' over the stuff we're bringing out. If there's so much as a miserable half-sovereign missing, the whole crowd here, cook and captain's dog, stay in a New Orleans calaboose till it's found, and then come out with their tickets dirtied. Oh! you one-eyed, mutton-headed fools!"

Onslow stared at the man curiously. His truculent tone had left him completely. His hands had quitted the pistol-butts and were gripped on the bridge-rail. His elbows were beating nervously against his ribs.

From some mouth in the blacker shadow came a deep, derisive laugh; and then a voice (presumably from the laughter) said: "Who wants to go to New Orleans? Who wants to go nearer than the next key, or reef, or sandbank, or whatever it may be? Let's pile up the blazing old tramp on that, and then boat-cruise across to Cuba. There's nice, snug bays in Cuba, where the *guardacostas* don't ask questions; or, if they did, a bit of yellow ballast out of the boats would stop their jaws quick enough."

The voice laughed again and ceased.

"Who spoke there?" Captain Kettle demanded.

Out rolled into the bright circle the massive body of the donkeyman.

"You!"

The donkeyman knuckled his greasy cap in assent.

"I'm your man, Capt'n," he said, "but I'd be pleaseder to help ye carrying out the crew's wishes than going agin them. You'll be dealt by honestly, Capt'n—liberally—yes, better than ye ever have been in this world yet, or ever will be again—an' the steamer will be lost at say. Blowed to rivuts an' ould iron by a conspirathor's bomb. It's a most natural ending for her."

Kettle stared at the donkeyman with his mouth agape, and the eyes standing out of his head. His face was thrust out at full neck's length; his fingers beat a vague tattoo on the white iron rail of the bridge.

Then the crew's original spokesman lifted up his unlucky voice for the second time: "Ach, vriends, we're vasting minutes. We haf made up our mindts. Why should we not go und tivide ter cold mitout funder pother? Cood Ole Man! come and sgramble for a share like ter rest of us."

Slowly Captain Kettle stiffened. His eyes lost

their stare and glinted unpleasant fire in their more proper orbits ; his lower jaw closed up with a snap ; his fists slid to his jacket pockets and gripped there.

“ You painted Dutchman ! ”

The crew rustled uneasily.

“ Do I live to hear a set of dogs like you dictating to me ? Does any man here think he’s going to have an inch of his own way aboard of me ? ”

“ Come, Captain Kettle,” said the quartermaster, who had talked before, “ don’t be unreasonable. The Dutchman means well, though he didn’t put it Bristol fashion. And besides, we’ve made up our minds to share in that gold, and you’d better chip in and share too, without a dust. It’ll be a deal comfortabler for all hands, and besides, it’s got to be done, anyway. We’re all determined, and we’re too many for you, even if Mr. Onslow does stand in on your side.”

Kettle’s face lit up with the joy of battle. “ Are you, by James ! ” he snapped. “ We’ll see about that. I’d handle twice your number to my own cheek any day. I done it before, on a dashed sight uglier lot than you, and came out top side ; and I’m going to do it again now. Mr. Onslow’s with me, too, this time, and we’ve got twenty bullets amongst us that’ll all go home in somebody’s ribs before any of you get at hand.

grips with us. Now just play on that, you scum. There's not a one of you got a pistol."

"Oh! haven't we?" commented a nasal voice on the outskirts of the crowd, "I guess you're out there, mister. I'm heeled for one."

Crack!

The man shrieked and fell in a limp heap on the deck. His weapon clattered down beside him. Kettle kept his smoking pistol-muzzle raised steady as an iron wrist could hold it.

The others instinctively drew at first away from the fallen man; but one ordinary seaman, younger and more plucky than the rest, darted forward to regain the fallen revolver. As his fingers closed over it, his eyes instinctively sought the bridge. Onslow had his revolver sighted over the crook of an elbow; Kettle his at arm's length. Both were covering him.

"Fling that thing overboard, or you'll be dead before you can wink!"

The crew's only revolver span through the air, and hit the water with a tinkling splash.

"Now stand forward the two fools who have been your spokesmen."

The crowd stood like men petrified.

"Quick, or I'll make practise into the brown of you!"

The quartermaster in the cardigan jacket stepped out of his own accord, undefiant now,

and white. The German was hustled to his side.

"Have you got a coin, quartermaster?"

"No, sir."

"Have you—sausage?"

"Yes, *herr*."

"Then spin it up, and do you, quartermaster, call to him. And mind you call right, because I'm going to shoot the loser, and perhaps you are the least useless of the two. Spin, confound you! Spin, sausage, or by James I'll shoot you where you stand, and settle it that way!"

The German put something between his dished palms and shook it violently; then clinched one hand, and thrust it out into the full blaze of the lamplight.

The quartermaster cried "head." The other unwrapped his grimy fingers with slow jerks, and showed. The coin was a halfpenny, Britannia uppermost. The quartermaster buttoned his cardigan jacket, and drew himself up to face the upper bridge.

"Hold up your hand!"

It shot up to the full length, fingers splayed out. Then *crack!* and a bullet ripped through the middle of the palm. The fellow let out a short yelp of surprise, and clapped the wounded member tightly under his armpit. The men around him, utterly cowed, stood in frozen silence;

and Captain Owen Kettle from the bridge waved slow patterns over them with a revolver muzzle.

Then he crammed both weapons into his jacket pockets again, and gave orders—sharply, crisply, and with decision.

“Watch below, get forward, and turn in. Watch on duty, go to your posts. Quartermaster of the watch, tumble up here. Sou’-west and by sou’.”

A quartermaster ran briskly up the bridge ladder.

“S’-west and by sou’ it is, sir,” he replied. It was the only comment any of the crew made to Captain Kettle on his method.

CHAPTER XI.

TO-NIGHT.

ANOTHER day and another sky. Now the blue Gulf waters were as leaden and dense as that one looks upon in a hard North Sea gale ; and the heavens overhead were full of lurid grays which raced one another in sliding chase till they were lost in the northern mist drifts. The steamer rolled heavily to a steep beam sea ; and when it could be seen, the iron of her lower decks, forward and aft, gleamed as though it had been new-coated with ocher varnish. But this was not often, for four minutes out of every five the decks were filled with a clamoring, hissing pond of green and cotton-white, which the scuppers could only empty piecemeal.

The time was evening—twenty hours after the quelling of the mutiny, and the three tenants of the upper bridge were the only human beings on any of the outer decks. On the midship grating stood a high-heeled quartermaster holding on to the spokes of the steam wheel, browsing on plug tobacco, and keeping his eyes mechanically

fixed on the jumping compass card. Alternately climbing and descending athwartships as the bridge swung under him, the third mate took his sea constitutional in rubber thigh-boots, with hands thrust into the waistbelt of his breeches. As officer of the watch, every time he passed the binnacle he faced front and took a regulation peer round the foggy line of horizon, with an utter lack of interest. He was an elderly man, the third mate, and the sea held no more surprises for him, and no more interest, and no more pleasures. If ever he had ambition, he had lost it years since. His aim in life was to hold a position of small responsibility, and earn a monthly wage with the smallest possible outlay of exertion, either mental or physical.

The remaining occupant of the bridge sat on a camp-stool under the lee of the weather dodger, with his red peaked beard on his chest, his slippered feet stuck out in front, his elbows crooked out behind him, and hands deep in his jacket pockets. Every time the third mate's footsteps neared him his eyes opened, and for an instant flashed round to the right-hand angle of their orbits. Between whiles he slept. It was owing to this faculty of literally snatching moments of rest that Captain Kettle, at the end of his twenty hours' spell on the upper bridge, was as fresh as though he had just got up from a clear night's

sleep. This watchfulness was necessary, for, as the experienced skipper was quite aware, fully half the hands would have gladly tossed him overboard if they could have grappled him without danger to themselves.

Presently, however, he dropped his doze with a snap, and slewed round to face the head of the bridge ladder, entirely wakeful.

A head showed itself, black-haired, with a clean-shaven, bright, determined face. The corresponding body followed—lean, tall, muscular.

“Ah, Mr. Onslow, you’ve brought me some provender? Thanks indeed. What? Sandwich and tea? Couldn’t be better.”

“I have whisky in my pocket.”

“Not for me now. Wait till we get ashore, and then I’ll booze with any man to his heart’s content. The game I’m on now is like a boat-race—if a man wants to win he’s got to diet himself.”

The third mate, to show to any chance onlooker that he was not in sympathy with the unpopular captain, planted himself in the angle of the lee dodger, which was the greatest distance that the ties of duty would allow him to depart. Kettle, with an acid grin, drew his companion’s attention to this move.

“What’ll that chap do to-night when the fun begins?”

"Bolt like a rat with the first alarm. He'd show pluck if he was paid for it, would my third mate; but not being paid, he'll take the best care possible of his own ugly hide. He isn't a fellow who'd ever like a tight corner for its own sake. There's not an atom of the sportsman about him."

Onslow laughed. "You're just the other way, Captain."

Kettle's face clouded. "It's a fact," he said. "Times I am that way—curse my cantankerous luck."

"Your weakness in that direction came in handily for me yesterday."

"You're right, Mr. Onslow, right all through. By George, I'd half a mind to chip in with these rogues and grab what I could. It was a tempting chance, and it would have been a deal more profitable to me than what I'm in for now. As for the honesty of the thing, there wasn't a pin to choose between it and this racket of yours and Mr. Shelf's. But it was that Dutchman's gall that put me off. If he'd held his silly jaw, and if those other bladder-heads had let me understand I was to hold the pistol-hand over them, well, the *Port Edes* would have coral rock spouting through her bottom plates this minute, and I'd be a man owning a matter of three to five thousand pounds. That's putting it straight."

"So," said Onslow, "I suppose I have to thank the said Dutchman for carrying a sound windpipe this minute?"

"No," replied Kettle thoughtfully, "I don't think it. I fancy you'd have behaved reasonable over the new deal, and then I'd have stood by you. Especially," he added slowly, as though from after-thought, "especially if those dogs thought that you'd have been safer out of the way. What," he asked with a sudden frown, as though the subject annoyed him—"what have you been doing with yourself this afternoon?"

"Physicking a sick fireman principally. The stokehold temperature was 105 degrees, and as he amused himself drinking condensed water by the quart together, the somewhat natural consequence was cramp in the stomach. They sent him up by the ashlift, and your steward dosed him with chlorodyne and laudanum, and tincture of rhubarb. The result wasn't encouraging."

"Oh, there's never any knowing what to do with a sick stoker's inside. But one of those drugs ought to have fetched him."

"Perhaps one did; but the other two didn't seem to fit his ailment."

"Well, he had them for nothing, so I don't see what call he had to complain. I never saw such a crew for physic. They've drunk that big chest half dry as it is, and if I'd let 'em, they'd have

drunk it three times over. What did you do to the chap? Fill him up on the same again, or try a pill? There's ten sorts of pills in that chest, beauties some of them. You should have tried him on those little silver-coated chaps marked C. They're regular twisters."

"Well, you see, he was twisted enough already, poor devil, and if it hadn't been for the donkey-man holding him, he'd have been overboard through the ash-shoot to be rid of his misery. So as it was I gave him a tumblerful of raw whisky, and that seemed gradually to untie him again out of his knots."

The captain snorted. "You're greener than I thought, Mr. Onslow. If we'd been going on, you'd have had half the crew sick on your hands for a dose of that kind. They're bad enough after sour, square doctor's physic, but for a tumbler of liquor and a spell of idleness, an old sailor would have an ear and three toes cut off any day. However," he added, rising stiffly to his feet and stretching, "the chief and donkey-man'll see he doesn't malingering for long. They are none of them sweet on doing another man's work, that gang. Heigh-ho! See that line of surf we're bringing over the lee quarter?"

"The Tortugas?"

"The Dry Tortugas. There's a Yankee convict station on one of them."

"Don't mention it."

Kettle grinned. "We shall have made enough westing soon, and then our course will be pretty nearly due north, so as to dodge the Gulf Stream as much as possible, and," he added, in a lower tone, "to get the ship as near as may be to your channel into Florida before we jettison the crew."

"We shall run into the ship tracks from all the northern Gulf ports to Europe."

"I know, and we must take our chance of not being spotted. For a western sea there's a regular string of traffic tailing down to the Dry Tortugas. There you are, for one. Look at that old wind-jammer."

He jerked with his thumb towards a green-painted wooden Italian barque, which was squatting past less than a quarter of a mile away, right athwart the last rays of the windy sunset. She was driving merrily homewards, sending her bows into it till the seas creamed against her cat-heads and darkened her jibs with brine up more than half their height. She was methodically reducing sail, and a dozen many-hued, picturesque tatterdemalions were aloft on the fore-topgallant yard hammering the struggling canvas into the gaskets.

"The cowardly Dagos," said Kettle; "that's always their way. Snug down to topsails as soon

as it gets dark, even if there's only a cat's-paw blowing. By James ! with a breeze like this I'd be carrying royals on that old tub. And yet," he went on, with his beard in the heel of his fist, and his eyes gazing out over the tumbling waters—"and yet they say there used to be poetry in a craft of that sort, whilst there never was, and never will be, with a steamer. I suppose the reason is, that a poet has to be a man who knows nothing whatever about what he writes upon. I know that some chaps who string verses nowadays have been on a steamboat and smelt the smells of her, and seen her lines, and watched the men who do the work ; and yet they make no poetry about it. But of the old crew who wrote about moaning harbor-bars, and fair white pinions, and lusty wooden walls, and trusty hearts of oak—why, they knew no more about the thing than a London bobby does of angels. And that, I suppose, was why their stuff is called poetry, and the lubberly old wind-jammers poetical. You give me a smart steamboat, Mr. Onslow ; there's all the romance on her an old sailorman's got any use for ; and he understands it, too, even if he can't put it down on paper."

"I believe you're right," said Onslow thoughtfully, "and some day a new Dana or a new Michael Scott will come ashore from the upper bridge, or from an electric-lighted forecastle, or

from a forced-draught engine-room, and show it to us plainly ; whereupon we shall swear that we saw it for ourselves all along. But," he went on, with a sudden frown, "for the present let that drift. You and I have enough to think of in our immediate present without speculating over a possible prophet which is to arise."

"We have ; but so much must be arranged by the chance of the moment that I don't see we can do much good by talking it over now. All arrangements that can be made ahead, I fancy we've got fixed up already. By the way, I suppose you are sure that your explosion in the forehold won't be too big ? It would be an awkward do for us if the old ship's bottom was really blown out in sober earnest."

The sun had gone entirely out by this time, and the young moon was sailing high amid scurrying cloud-banks. In the white and shifting light, Patrick Onslow's face looked pale and anxious.

"You're sure," Kettle repeated, "it won't be a case of the engineer being hoisted with his own thingammy ?"

"No, I'm not sure ; and that's what bothers me. You see, one couldn't quite get an expert to measure out the precise necessary dose, and I've had to guess at it. I daren't undercharge my bomb. If our explosion was a fizzle, and the crew didn't get scared and run, why then they'd

take her up to New Orleans whether we liked it or not ; and she'd be examined. Then that intake valve couldn't be missed, and it couldn't be explained away. Man, as you know, the thing's as big as a sluice-gate ! ”

“ All the bilge pumps in the Gulf of Mexico couldn't make headway against that valve, once it was fairly opened. It's the quickest and cleverest way of scuttling a steamboat I ever heard of or read about. But I don't quite see how the valve is going to be turned.”

“ You leave that to me.”

“ You seem used to the game,” said Kettle, with a half sneer.

“ No, I'm not,” returned the other quickly. “ I've never had my fingers in anything so ugly or so dirty before ; and because I don't want to have the experience over again, I'm going to make this turn to a big profit, or get killed in the trying. I'm tired and sick of this wild, bucketing life. A woman drove me to it ; but I believe, if I had the means to settle down in comfort now, I could forget all about her, and wake up other new interests.”

“ Well,” said Kettle, “ I hope we may each of us buy a farm out of this racket ; but, I tell you straight, I'm not over sweet on the chances. To begin with, you and I can't handle this steamboat alone. It's an absolute certainty we must have

another hand to help us. You'll have to take the wheel and pilot her through if you can, though that's a mighty big job for one man, and the odds are about ten to one you'll pile her up somewhere. I've got to be below. At a pinch I might drive the engines, though I don't know much of the trade; but I can't do that and fire six two-hole boilers, and wheel coals out of the bunkers as well. Now, I think the donkeyman is the chap we want. He understands his way about down there, he's as strong as a winch, and I fancy he knows which side his biscuit's margarined."

"Yes, I'm with you there. We'll have the donkeyman if he'll come."

"Then why not sound him now?"

"Because I'll hint of this infernal scheme to no one till it's fairly ablaze. Man! if a ghost's whisper of it got about, the crew would rise and grab us, pistols or no pistols. They have that amount of scare in them they'd walk straight up to a Maxim gun. They'd trample us out of existence before we could fairly look round. No, my neck itches enough as things are at present; and if another on board now besides you knew what was going to be done to-night, I should feel a bowline noose inside my collar, with half a dozen hangmen beginning to tug at it."

"See here, Mr. Onslow," said the shipmaster, "are you getting sorry you came out on this trip?"

The other laughed harshly. "Sorry? What-ever have you got in your head now? If I do a thing, I do it with my eyes open, and I make a point of never indulging in useless regrets afterwards. No, Captain Kettle, I'm going through with this matter, whether it succeeds or it fails; whether it is brought about without injury to a single human soul, or whether it costs the last pant of breath for every one in this ship. But I own to you I am nervous. The only things which we can be sure will happen, are the unexpected; and we can't prepare for those; and the want of preparation may ruin us."

"It's a big gamble," assented Kettle, "and I wish I could say, 'May the Lord defend the right!' But I can't, and you can't, and, least of all, Shelf can't. It's a devil's job anyway, and he don't always stand by his men. The only thing is, even Nick can't diddle my wife and kids out of the insurance I made for them; so, personally speaking, I don't much care what happens. You go below to your room now, and get a caulk of sleep. You'll want it. And, first, if you please, I'll shake hands with you. We've never done it before, because a nod's been enough other times; but this is different. You're a decentish sort; and I fancy if that woman hadn't meddled, you wouldn't have been shipmates here with me to-night."

They exchanged a quick handgrip, each looking

rather ashamed of himself; and then Onslow went down the bridge ladder whistling, and Owen Kettle resettled himself on his camp-stool. When next they met, the tragedy of the *Port Edes* would have begun, and in it perhaps both would die by any out of ten violent deaths.

CHAPTER XII.

A DERELICTION.

EIGHT bells—midnight.

The look-out in the crow's-nest forward chanted his last melancholy "All's well!" and gave way to the relief from the next watch. He climbed down by the cleats in the iron mast, and went to the starboard door in the forecastle. Other men followed him, jumping like cats along the streaming decks; and others came a little later—dingy fellows with neckclouts like dishcloths, who went in at the port door; these last being the goats of shipboard, the firemen and trimmers, who were divided off from the more high-caste deckhands by a fore-and-aft bulkhead.

The third mate and the quartermaster, too, from the upper bridge, were replaced by another quartermaster and another mate; and they also went to the places appointed for them, and the snores of their breathing soon rattled against the bunk coamings. Only two men on the *Port Edes*, who were not on the roster of duty, stood that windy morning's first watch. Under the lee of

the canvas shelter Captain Kettle sat huddled on his camp-stool in a style which no man could distinguish with certainty between wakefulness and sleep; and below in his room, which opened off the main cabin, and was next the treasure-chamber, Patrick Onslow was dabbling in something which the laws of nations would stigmatize as felony, and that of complex degree.

There were two berths in the room—the upper one against the window port, which he slept in, and the lower, which contained two spread-out portmanteaus. Beneath this last were drawers in which the captain's steward kept table linen, disused corks, the carpet which the chart-house sported in harbor, and other articles of ship's use. Onslow had two of these drawers out on the floor, and from the recess of their site had drawn two fine green-silk-covered wires.

He disentangled the coils, taking care to avoid a kink, and then unscrewed the porcelain switch which governed the room's electric lamp. Beneath were certain pieces of metal embedded in vulcanite.

Patrick Onslow gave his arms a preliminary stretch, a bare wire terminus in each hand. His fingers were trembling, as whose would not have been in the same situation?

He noticed it, and commented to himself on the circumstance: "That's excitement, I sup-

pose—excitement pure and understandable. Not being a man of stone, I can't help being thrilled with the majesty of the moment, the sublime vagueness of my knowledge of what will happen when a current flashes through these wires. I'm not a coward. People who write about other men's feelings when Death is beginning to paw them on the shoulder, write mostly from the imagination; and, so far as I've seen, they all do it wrong. I've been there; I've felt the old man's bony touch more than once; and so I know. A man isn't of necessity terrified; phantoms of his past deeds do not invariably flash before him; nor does he always lose his nerve, and move like a cheap automaton. I can't speak for others; but what I personally have felt has been a dull carelessness for what is going to happen, and a curiosity about what will come afterwards. It seems to me that a thinking man, with the ambition of a mouse, should never fear death, because once dead, he becomes wiser than all the living remnant of the human race. There are men, I know, whom physical danger turns into a helpless mass of palpitating nerves. Shelf, for instance, is one of those. By Jove!"—he smiled grimly—"by Jove! I'd give a finger to have Theodore Shelf in my shoes just now, and force him to couple these wires, and spring the mine with his own fat, white fingers. I believe—

yes, I verily believe the experience would turn him honest. Ah, there goes one bell. Time's up."

Through a lull in the wind, the tenor clang of the ship's bell came down to him, and on its heels, more dimly, the look-out's dissyllabic assurance in the dismal minor key that he was awake, and had nothing to report.

Then Patrick Onslow made connection, and sent through the green-silk covered wires a current direct from the steamer's dynamo; and on that moment was thrown against the iron roof of the state room as though the infernal machine had exploded beneath his very feet

* * * * *

The camp-stool was kicked into the air, the wet canvas dodgers shed water in streams, and Captain Owen Kettle fell spread-eagled on the planking of the bridge. From the hatch in the fore-deck before him had sprung a volcano of ruddy flame spurting through vast billows of smoke; the iron plating round it buckled and split; and the whole steamer gave a trembling, frightened leap. Presently, from the black, windy night above, there fell an avalanche of *débris* which smote the steamer and the water round, like canister-shot from a distant cannonade.

Then came a thumping jar from the engine-room, repeated twice over; and then the engines stopped.

"My God," thought Kettle, "he's overshot the mark! If she's broken down, we're done for."

But for all that he did not lose for an instant his presence of mind or instinct of command; but, picking himself up, clapped a stumpy leaden whistle between his lips and blew shrilly.

At first no one answered his summons. From the fore-castle, from the stokehold, from aft, came the ship's company, making by instinct for the high land of the bridge deck; and from his eminence the little captain scowled down upon them and swore. It is not a wholesome sight to see grown men screaming through sheer terror; and the sooner they are dissociated, either by words or blows, from this frame of mind, the more they will be able subsequently to respect themselves. By dint of a vinegar tongue, and suggestive movements towards a pair of implements which bulged his jacket pockets, Kettle drove a gang of five to set the mizzen trysail to keep the steamer head to sea. She was rapidly losing her way, and if she broached-to beam-on with that heavy sea running, the lower decks would be filled with green water continuously, and that, with such a gaping rent where the hatch had been, meant simply a rapid swamping.

Then the captain looked round him, seemingly for a messenger. The mate of the watch hung on to the handle of the engine-room telegraph, which

still pointed to "full speed ahead," looking dazed and helpless. The quartermaster's hands were mechanically sawing at the spokes of the wheel, but it was equally evident that he also did not know what he was doing. Just then Onslow raced up the bridge ladder three steps at a time.

"Ah," cried Kettle, "now you are a man who can keep his head in a bit of a fluster, and by James you're the only one on board. Just tumble forward, will you, and get down into that hold? See what's wrong."

Onslow nodded and turned to go without a word. From two or three of the men a thin cheer rose as he passed them, and before he had gained the bottom of the ladder on to the iron lower deck, half a dozen were on the top rungs after him. Sailors will seldom refuse to follow when a superior shows the way; and besides, these fellows were getting over their first panic, and were beginning to be ashamed of themselves for giving way to it.

The mizzen trysail was not then set, and because the steamer's way had left her, she was falling off into the trough, and rolling bulwarks under to every sea. She was shipping water fast. The creaming, solid masses sluicing across the deck-plates smote the men breech high with the weight of rams; and he who, when the waters were upon him, left his hold, would have been

swept like a cork to leeward. But, by the hatch-coamings, the winches, and odd wet streamers of rope, they clawed their way forward, and cowered round the great hole made by the explosion, holding there by the edge of the twisted, riven plates. The seas creamed over their heads, falling in noisy cascades into the blackness below, and from out of that darkness, above all the bellying of wind and the clanging of iron and the other din, came a sodden whistling of water, which seemed to confirm the worst fears.

"Pooh!" said some one, trying to be cheery, "that's only the small sup she's shipped since the hatches were blown off. The bilge pumps'll soon kick that drop overboard."

"Guess you lie," said another, with a weary shake of the head.

Then the ink of the heavens overhead was splashed with a vivid fork of lightning, and the men saw Onslow, with his face as white as his teeth, lowering himself over the brink, and gripping with his knees a twisted iron pillar below. The light above slapped out, and within the dim, jagged outline of where the hatch had been all was blackness. And overhead the thunder rumbled like the passing of a Titan's gun-train. The men shivered. One of them, an old, white-haired able-seaman, was physically sick. And meanwhile the *Port Edes* rolled through forty-

two degrees, and the Gulf water flowed in green and black over each bulwark alternately.

The men hung over the dark abyss of the hatch listening intently, and above the noises of the gale they could hear the sullen wash of water in the hold growing heavier and more sullen with every roll. Another flash of lightning blazed out overhead, painting white the shaft of the hatch, and showing at its foot a muddy sea, full of floating straws, and barrel staves, and litter. Onslow was out of sight. And the lower hold was afloat almost to its deck-beams.

But presently the explorer returned, swimming rather than walking—as another flash showed them—and he leaped to the battens which made the stairway to overhead with the haste of a man who knows that the waste of moments may well cost human lives. The men clustered about him round-eyed as he gained the deck for a word of what he had seen, but he brushed through them roughly and made for aft. It seemed to them that no spoken sentence could have given a worse report of what had befallen than this mute action. The fellows knew that officers always made the best of everything, if there is a best to be made; and so the silence was terribly suggestive.

At the same moment, as if to confirm their worst fears, the steamer took a heavy sea clean over

her forecastle head; and above the din of the water, as it came cascading down into the lower deck, there arose wild cries of, "She's sinking!" "Her bottom's blown out!" "She's settling by the head!"

Yelling these tidings, the men scampered back to the bridge-deck, where, saving for the few driven off to set the mizzen trysail, all the rest of the steamer's complement were collected.

"She's settling by the head! It's making a clean breach over her this minute! She'll be down with us if we don't look quick!"

Then another voice cried: "Let the foul old tramp go to hell by herself. She shan't drown me, for one, while she's got a boat that'll swim. Come along, boys!" Whereupon a mixed half-dozen of deck-hands and firemen made a rush for the foot of the upper bridge ladder.

At the head of that ladder stood Captain Kettle, grinning like a tortured fiend. The crew were acting precisely as it had been planned that they should act. They were doing what a laboriously-formed plot had compelled them to do. But at that moment the little captain's weakness for battle nearly got the better of him, and was within an ace of making him attempt to upset the entire apple-cart. The idea of his men—the despised all-nation rabble, whom he had brow-beaten into subjection all across the broad Atlantic—taking

the initiative into their own hands now, was too much for him to swallow in a single dose. Sooner than submit, he would have ruined everything ten times over. Consequently he drew on the first man who advanced up the ladder, and his eyes lit up with the steady, passionless glare of slaughter.

The fellow was brave enough—desperate, too, as a man could be—but upon certain death he hesitated to advance. Indeed, when Kettle, coming down the ladder himself, thrust him furiously back with a black pistol muzzle, he retreated to the bridge-deck, as did those who were with him.

But the other men of that worthy crew had no mind to be tyrannized over any longer when the steamer was momentarily settling down under their feet, and drowning was an immediate question. By the funnel stays and by one another's backs they swarmed on to the top of the fiddley, and thence gaining the boat platforms, set about cutting adrift the grimy awnings with their knives, and clearing away the tackles and falls. They shipped rudders and fitted the plugs, and one or two, with more forethought than their frightened fellows, shouldered the boats' water-breakers and took them aft to where the condenser-tap gave upon the lower deck.

Kettle did not interfere. He had held the

bridge-deck ladders against all comers, and in some cranky way felt that his honor was unsmirched. But he gave no help, no hint, no further order, and surveyed the scene with folded arms and a sour, thin smile. Patrick Onslow, being moved by a different set of feelings, acted more humanely.

“Take time, men,” he sung out coolly, “if you will be cowards and leave the ship. I don’t think she’ll sink—at any rate not yet.”

The men had knocked away the chocks, hoisted the boats, and swung the davits outboard.

“Keep your heads, you trembling idiots! Pass your painters forward before you begin to lower, and don’t lower till you’ve victualled the boats. You’ve at least a hundred-and-fifty mile run before you can make Charlotte Harbor, which is your best port with this wind blowing; and as like as not you’ll miss your road when you get inshore among the keys and reefs, and be a week getting there.”

A few of the men, seeing the force of this, ran below and raided the galley and the steward’s store-room of what they could lay hands upon. But they only brought up one load of tins. They were frightened lest the others should in their terror go off without them. So they bundled their gleanings pell-mell on to the floor gratings, and, with a dozen men in each, the boats began to

lower away. When they touched water, the falls were let go to overhaul as they chose, and then unhooked. The boats rode by their painters, swooping on one sea up to the level of the bridge-deck, diving twenty feet down in the next trough, and lying in very great danger of being stove to pieces.

A man in each was standing by the painter, others were getting out oars.

"Where's the donkeyman?" cried some one.

"And Mr. Onslow?"

"And the skipper?"

"Oh, in the boat."

"Then cast off. We've got all, and we must be clear of the ship before she founders, or she'll take us down too in her wash."

The painters were slipped, and from either beam the steamer's lifeboats diverged under the backing impulse of their oars. Out of sight of one another they dropped astern, and each picking a favorable chance, they slewed round in a pother of spray.

Then they stepped their masts; and then, one under a jib, and the other under close-reefed lug, they drove away before the wind, leaving the setting of a course for after consideration.

Steamer sailors are not used to small-boat sailing in a heavy sea, and it takes them some time to wear down the novelty of it. By a provi-

dence, there was the second mate in one, an old North Sea smacksman, to take the tiller, and an able seaman from the same school in the other boat, who was also competent to manage her. The boats were built for the weather, but they required handling ; and excepting these two men, there were no others up to the task. The rest trimmed ship, some of them baling, some too frightened to do anything but cling on to a thwart—these last from the fireholds mostly—and with their complements in this danger and disorder, the *Port Edes'* two lifeboats drove away into the night and the north-north-east.

Three men on the steamer, from inside the chart-house, watched the boats go away ; and one of them, the donkeyman, was wondering what kind of fool to call himself for being left

CHAPTER XIII.

THREE FOR TWENTY-SEVEN.

"Now, my lads," said Kettle, "you've got to hump yourselves, or we'll have the steamer swamping beneath us. It'll be touch and go, anyway. Mr. Onslow, you will have the deck all to yourself--after you've done your job on the forehold, of course; and you'd better jump lively after that at once. Every gill of water tells now, and it strikes me if we get very much more of the Mexican Gulf on board the decks will blow up, and she'll go down like kentledge ballast."

Onslow darted away through the doorway.

"And now, Mister Sullivan, understand that although I still continue to rate as skipper of this craft, for the present I'm going to work as fireman and coal-trimmer. You will be chief engineer; and I'm the sum total of your crew; and between us we've got to do the work of seven horses and one mule. Are the bilge-pumps clear?"

"Yes, sor."

"And has she still a good head of steam?"

"She has. None's been blown off."

"Then pick up your feet and let's go to your hardware shop and start in work."

"Wait a bit, sor," said the donkeyman. "There's things here I don't understand. "Aren't the lives of us in beastly danger? Didn't them boats go off because the steamer's sinking?"

"Do you," retorted Kettle, "consider me one of those fancy sorts of maniac, who have no wish to survive the loss of a ship? I tell you I should have been drowned eight times already if that had been my lay. No, Mr. Chief, fair fight's right enough, and I'd stand up to Nick in that, and value my life at less than a rice-mat; but, at other times, you bet, I'm no fool to chuck it away."

"But," said the donkeyman, "what gets me's this. If the blooming steamer's bottom's shot out, what's the fun in messing with it? The Mexican Gulf will circulate through that hole longer than our bilge-pumps will run."

"You tire me," said the little man. "Who said she'd her bottom blown out? I tell you this steamer was sunk a few plates above her usual trim—for reasons; and now we are going to pull her up again. See here, do you take the synch from me, Mr. Chief, and ask no more questions, and you'll get told no lies. It'll pay

you. If you do as you're bid aboard of me you'll have sovereigns enough given you to work through the biggest spree that was ever spread out in a seaport town."

The big donkeyman appreciatively drew the back of a hand across his muzzle.

"Ah, Captain dear," he said coaxingly, "I'd just like to hear ye mention a figure."

"Call it two ten-pound notes."

"Then, be Christopher, I'm yer man for any piece of devilment in the calendar! Come along, Captain dear. 'Tis a melojious little man y' are, for all they say against yez."

Meanwhile the steamer was becoming more and more waterlogged with every plunge and roll, and Patrick Onslow feared that his dangerous stratagem for driving away the crew had been carried too far. It seemed to him impossible that they could salvage her now. True, she was brought up to the wind by the after-canvas, and her rollings were not of such sickening strength; but the stern loomed high in the wild night air, and the bows lunged deep into every successive sea that rolled up from the stormy south, taking green water over the forecastle head in masses which scoured anchors and windlass to the naked iron.

The wash found its way below through that jagged gap in the lower deck in crashing water-

falls, and every moment, too, the opened valve beside her keel was gushing in fresh gallons to the swamping holds. Any larger sea which swept up now might well settle over her solidly, and launch her with bursted decks on to the sponges and the coral growths a hundred fathoms below.

Some men, in the face of such conditions, would have been mazed, helpless—physically incapable, in the presence of that solitude, of making any necessary effort; for it is one thing to do a desperate matter before the eyes of an applauding crowd, and another when the Devil below is your only appreciative onlooker. It would have been beyond the capabilities of Captain Kettle, for instance. Onslow, however, was the one man in the million to whom the adventure was as meat and drink. If he succeeded, then the profit was his; if he failed, death would be useful to him; and anyway there was the wild excitement of the moment, which was a meal to be enjoyed, and one which nothing could snatch away.

It was in this mood of mind that the man on whose actions the very outer-air existence of the *Port Edes* depended left his fellows in the chart-house, and raced forward to where the jagged lip of the forehold hatch yawned to the swilling seas. Without lantern, without so much as a

look before him, he lowered himself on to the twisted battens below, with the clean water raining on to him from above, and muddy wavelets squirting up from beneath; and then when the steamer gave a heavy send, and the more solid wash from the hold smote him heavily upon the thighs, he loosed his grip, and dived like a stone through the brimming shaft-way of the hatch.

Seconds passed, a minute, two minutes, and still he did not re-appear. Three minutes. Then the rounded outlines of something black rolled to the surface, and surged about limply with the swill of the water.

For a while it stayed so; then, swung by a heavier pitch of the steamer, it was washed to the back of a stanchion, where it hung. The slopping water beneath ebbed steadily. The valve in the steamer's bottom had been closed. Her bilge pumps were running at speed.

During a whole hour Patrick Onslow lodged behind that iron pillar, a mere boneless mass of flesh and clothes; and then the pains of life came into him again with shivers and shudderings. The thin gray light of the dawn was filtering down through the jagged opening above when first the trembling lids slid from his eyeballs; but for still another thirty minutes he was a thing of no wit, breathing truly, but caring naught for all the world contained.

Then a sucking, sobbing noise from the depths of the hold far beneath broke upon his ear, and the languid brain began to work. With an effort he sat up, dizzily holding to the pillar, trying to think where he was, and how ran recent history; and by degrees the details strolled back to him. Before, however, he had gathered all his senses, or a working quantum of strength, he had a visitor in the shape of the donkeyman, who clattered up over the decks with plate-shod boots, and crouched beside the gap above on knees and hands.

"Have you been getting hurt, now?" inquired this new-comer.

"About nine-tenths drowned, I fancy, if that counts. But I'm pretty near all right again now."

"Ye don't look ut," replied the donkeyman candidly. "Barrin' the tan, ye'd be blue and lard color about the face this minute. But I feared there was something wrong through not seeing ye on the bridge, so I nipped into the chart-room and pockutted a whisky-bottle that was lying convenient—in case. Pull at the small end, sor."

The bottle was handed down, and Onslow lifted it, his teeth chattering against the nozzle like castanets; but the spirit drove up color into his face, and set the sluggish blood once more on its appointed journey through his limbs and trunk.

“What has happened since I left you?” he asked.

“Well, first, sor, the captain and meself had a little friendly discussion about what’s been happening, and came to a bit of a financial agreement. But I will say that I figured me new terms very low when I understood it was a thrifle of a conspiracy that ye wanted me to stand in at. And then, sor, we went below to the engine-room and turned steam into the bilge pumps, to heave this nasty slop of water overboard; after which, as chief, I set about making a thrifling repair to the low-pressure engine. Ye see, when that explosion took place, a bit of a casting jumped into the crank-pit, and got jammed there hard before they could stop her. I’ve had a fair do at elbow work, cutting it out cold; but it’s clear now, and she runs as sweetly as she did the day she left the shops. But oh, Mr. Onslow, I wish you could see the Old Man. The sight of that little chap, shoveling coals, and swearing, and tumbling, and burning himself, is enough to make the ghosts of some dead firemen I know about grin and dance sand-jigs in their graves.”

The donkeyman was inclined to be garrulous, and evidently lusted for a considerable chat; but, with returning strength, Onslow’s anxiety grew on him again, and he climbed out on deck keen to be once more in action. His knees were tot-

tery, and the donkeyman gave him an arm aft. But when he had climbed up the ladder and gained the bridge deck, he stood for a minute staring, and then threw up his hands and pitched forward on to the planking, as though a bullet had bitten the life in his brain.

The big donkeyman also was startled. Out of the morning mists of the south there had come up a small center-board schooner of some fifteen tons—an oysterman, perhaps, in the season, and now a sponge-gatherer or a mere coaster. She was coming down over the seas dry as a gull, driving along under her boom foresail and jib.

The donkeyman's eye hung on her as she surged past the rust-streaked flank of the steamer, some twenty fathoms away, not because the sight of a little white-painted schooner was new to him, not because he was impressed by the danger to the *Port Edes'* enterprise in her being seen by any alien eye, but on account of the tiny vessel being handled (in what to her was distinctly ugly weather) by so extraordinary a person as a young and pretty girl. No one else was on deck, and the girl sat on the coaming of the cockpit, tiller in one hand, tiller rope in the other, as unconcernedly as though she had been an ancient mariner, bred and aged in fore-and-afters.

She was a girl, too, with looks much to the Irishman's liking: with copper-red hair, whose

ends blew out from beneath a green Italian's nightcap ; laughing, impudent features, with the color whipped up into warm pinks by the wind ; a figure of pretty curves ; and the shapeliest little brown fists in the world splayed on the tiller and gripping the restraining tiller-rope. She was fairly well up to the eyes in her steering, but she found time to throw an *œillade* towards the steamer, which Mr. Sullivan answered with a yell intended to show his complete admiration, and a swirl of his greasy cap. It was then that Onslow fell, and the donkeyman took his eyes from the schooner, and picked him up and once more applied the whisky-bottle. "More drowned than I thought for !" he muttered. "It'll be a pig's mess for us if he goes ill."

But Patrick Onslow had not fainted through the effect of his recent struggle with death. It was quite another matter which had dealt him the sufficing shock.

In the steerer of that little schooner he had seen the sister of the woman to whom he had once been affianced, who had discarded him for another man, who had driven him from a sedate English life to be a wanderer and a vagabond upon the face of the earth. His roamings had begun and continued only because the image of this one woman had refused to leave his thoughts ; and the half-sarcastic nickname of "The Great Trav-

eler" had been gained without any seeking on his part.

Five long desperate years had passed since the blow fell upon him, and time was doing its work. He had begun to forget her; to promise himself that, this present enterprise accomplished, he would eliminate the past, and lead a different and cleaner life; and yet, here, on the most unlikely corner of God's earth, her sister passed like a stage figure before his eyes—the sister from whom she was never parted.

The shock came upon him as a thunderbolt from a blue sky. He had fancied her to be in England, Europe, Australia—anywhere but here. In his weak state the surprise was too great. Again the gush of the waters thundered in his ear; again the light faded from his eyes; and this time he dived into blank unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XIV.

A PIRATES' HARBOR.

WINDLESS swell and a burning sky. Ahead, broken palings of mop-headed tree-trunks growing straight across the sea; on one beam, scattered patches of white, where the surf crumbled over hidden coral reef; on the other, the bright blue water of the Mexican Gulf, with its yellow floating tangles of weed. A steamer lunging through the rollers at a small six knots.

On her decks was visible one man, and one alone, and he was on the upper bridge, with his fists on the spokes of the steam steering-wheel. He was swaying with weariness, his eyes were dull and leaden, his cheeks were of an unwholesome yellow, because the tan would not let them turn pale white. Yet his task was one which put to the strain every piece of his alertness. He was taking a steamer drawing nineteen feet through a channel of whose very existence no man on earth besides himself had ever guessed; and already he was deep in sea-territory which the charts of 1893 still mark as "unsurveyed." He had vaguely found the channel some months

before in an open boat, and written cross compass-bearings on the back of a crumpled envelope. These he carried in his head now, and used as the sea-marks closed ; but they were a frail reed for much dependence.

For such work a leadsman is an absolute necessity ; and on board the *Port Edes* a leadsman was an absolute impossibility. The remaining two of her manning were working as ten men to keep up any head of steam for her engines. And so Patrick Onslow took his soundings with eye and nostrils, as do some of the more ancient of the coaster folk ; and instinct did not, upon the whole, serve him badly. Twice he scoured the steamer's bottom plates over branching coral plants, which broke away with clattering jars, and let her through to deeper water ahead ; and once he ran upon a tail of white sand, which pinned her just forward of 'midships. But he rang off the engines, waited till the scream of the escape-pipe showed a full head of steam, and then on a flowing tide put her full speed astern, and slid clear.

The skipper in the stokehold below waxed blasphemous at the man who had "got the shore on board ;" but he did not cease from shoveling coals ; neither did the big donkeyman, save at those moments when the clang of the telegraph-bell called him to stand by the throttle or reversing gear in the engine-room.

So the *Port Edes* drew up this narrow, unknown sea-river, through the shallows which fill that bight of the S. W. Floridan coast, and the tired man who was governing her steered every hour with stronger confidence and duller consciousness. Now he held on to what was apparently an unbroken line of surf, where, if the steamer struck, she would be a stove-in wreck within the hour; but as she closed with it a passage opened out which took her through in clear water, although the yeasty surges of the backwash would leap like live things far up her sides, and scream and bellow through the scuppers. Now he dodged, with helm hard a-starboard one minute, hard to port the next, amongst an archipelago of unnamed keys, where the first mangrove trees were getting to work at building these outlying scraps of animal stone into part of the North American continent.

Beyond was a broad, smooth lagoon, shimmering in the sunlight, dancing with little silver waves, and beyond, again, was a wall of woodwork growing in one solid mass of trunks from behind the tangle of slimy mangroves which sprawled along the water's edge. Bare land was to be seen nowhere; all was blotted out by the rank luxuriance of the subtropical flora.

The steamer held on her course athwart this placid sea-lake, aiming straight as a rifle-shot for what

appeared to be the densest part of the forest. But as she neared it, an overlapping cape gradually distinguished itself from the rest of the greenery, and directly afterwards banks of milky sand opened out, with a gut of river between them.

Onslow steered on, sitting upon the grating now, and holding the wheel one-handed by the lower spokes; and in the fat, hot stew of the stokehold below, Kettle and the donkeyman shoveled coal to the light of reeking slush-lamps and the tune of furnace-roar.

The steamer, in grip of the river-stream, swung round the bights and twistings, finding deep water everywhere, though often she could not make the turn quickly enough, and bruised with her forefoot the slimy mangrove-stems which marked the bank. But the current was strong, and each time swept her clear, and those below were scarcely conscious of the graze.

Knot by knot, the brine of the Mexican Gulf was being left behind, and the noises of the woods and odors of the trees and the swamps were closing in upon them. The swell fanning out from the steamer's wake wetted the alligators in their basking-places behind the sawgrass; and the reek from her smoke-stacks scared the stilt-legged waterfowl afish in the shallows. She coasted round a bayou of black water, walled in by stern ranks of cypress-trees; she cut across

another with graceful-leaved palmetto-scrub on either hand, and ragged cabbage-palms sprouting out from above. And then she swung again where the river forked, and steamed down a straight, unswerving water-line, which led to the very heart of the Everglades.

But the pace was slowing now ; slowing, indeed, till the steamer would hardly steer against the current, which ever and anon gripped her by the head or the tail, and carried her with sullen sheerings on to mangrove cluster or tree-clad bluff. And the reason was that the head of steam was failing. Captain Owen Kettle, as more Christian men have done before, ignored his own previous preachings when the application came in, and proved only human soon after he had taken up the *rôle* of fireman. Driven half lunatic by the heat and the work, he kept dipping his lips in the water-bucket, and drinking heavy draughts. As a consequence, that unpoetical complaint, cramp in the stomach, overtook him at last, and tied him into those ungainly knots of torture which he had so frequently observed upon scientifically in others. But, as there was no one at hand to administer the heroic remedy of chlorodyne *cum* rhubarb *cum* laudanum *cum* pill, and give him something else to think about, in the original kind of knots he remained.

The donkeyman, with a hearty Belfast curse,

tried to do double work ; but, as he had been laboring quite to the top of his strength for many hours previously, the effort did not meet with unqualified success. As anyone with less dogged, wooden pluck might have known, it is impossible for one man to fire a twelve-furnace steamer, wheel himself coal from the bunkers, and act as engineer and greaser when required, however great be the initial supply of brute force with which God has endowed him. Every time he wiped the wet from his eyes and looked at the steam-gauge, it had climbed down since the time before ; and however furiously he might heave new fuel on to the caking clinkers, that jumping index would continue its downward crawl.

The oiled rumbling of the engines slowed, and grew more sluggish, and then the ponderous cranks took to stopping on a turn, as though to gain strength for the next round. But this did not go on for long. The donkeyman felt a gentle heave of the foot-plates beneath him, and then a heel which was not recovered. "And begor !" said he, "the bucking old tramp's tuk the ground at last, thanks be !"

He pitched his shovel through a dull glowing furnace-door, and turned to where the little Captain was lying on the polished foot-plates, holding a yellow, flaring slush-lamp before him to see through the stifling, dusty gloom.

"Gum!" he exclaimed, "the Old Man looks pretty sick. I'll crane him up in the ash-lift."

This he did, and took his commanding officer into the main cabin, where the air was bright and baking, and the mosquitoes were biting like dogs. Then, throwing back the lid of the medicine-chest (which stood beside the door into the companion way), he gazed appreciatively at the rows of bottles, unstoppered one or two and sniffed at their contents, and then slammed down the lid again as a thought struck him.

"No," he said, "I'm blistered if I do! Red Kettle wouldn't give me physic last time I thought I'd like a dose, an' now I'll see how he fancies getting round on nothing. Fair play's a jool. I'll just report to the pilot, an' then turn in."

The "pilot," however, when the donkeyman had wearily hauled himself on to the upper bridge and stood by his side, proved to be so dead asleep that no amount of shouting or shaking would wake him. Even the flies did not make him wince.

"Sor, wake or ye'll be sunstrook, if ye're not that already. Rouse, sor; I can't lug ye below, an' I can't rig an awnin'. I'm too tired to spake again; but if yez stay here ye'll fry like a rasher an' be ate by flies. There's a whopping skeeter in each of yer eyeholes this minut, an' a kind of a locust browsing on the end of yer snout. Listen!

I'm knockin' wid a boot-toe on yer ribs. Well, man, now, if ye won't listen to reason, it's just leavin' yez I am to stew in yer own juice."

The donkeyman clumped heavily back down the ladder, and went with weary steps aft along the bridge-deck towards his own place. But at the break of the deck he paused, spread his grimy, shiny elbows on the rail, and indulged in a thin, small whistle.

"Now here," he soliloquized, "we have come, as the skipper remarked, up an unbeknown drain, to which man's improvements have not been introduced, and there's callers turning up already. That was the nose of a gaff-taups'l squintin' between those treetops down-stream a minute ago, or I'm a Dago. D'ye know, Mr. Sullivan, chief of the *Port Edes*, I'm beginning to think ye'd have got better value if ye'd gone cruisin' off by an' large with the other boys in the lifeboats. Thru, there's the twenty one-pound notes to draw, and a daisy of a spree to have if ye can get anywhere to have ut; but ye've worked that wage out already, me son, an' it rather seems as though there's more laboriousness to follow."

He yawned cavernously. "'Tisn't often I'd say 'No' to a bit of a scrimmage, but theatricals are not to my taste just now at all. Too much overtime ruins the sense of humor."

He yawned again, and blinked his eyes drearily.

"You must turn in now, Mr. Sullivan dear, or ye'll fall down here and be ate alive by the skeeters an' other wild beasts of the forrust; and if the explorers who are underneath that white gaff-taups'l want to come aboard here and make throuble, so far as you're concerned they'll be let."

And with that the donkeyman staggered away to his room beneath the poop, sat over the edge of his bunk, and was snoring melodiously before his head and his heels were on the blanket.

Meanwhile, a mile lower down, a small center-board sloop was turning to windward up the river, but making little headway against the current. A negro stood in her fore-scuttle, with his elbows on the deck. Two others sprawled on either side of him. A big white man lay spread-eagled on the top of the coach-roof of the cabin, and another stood in the cock-pit steering.

Of all the quintette, the man at the tiller was the only one who showed signs of energy, and his energy had sulphurous anger mixed with it. He was a bowed, shambling creature, with one eye red and the other missing, with long, hairy, ape-like arms, and with a dumb impediment of speech, which threw him into paroxysms of temper every second time he opened his lips. Once or twice, when his malady struck him voiceless in the middle of a sentence, the other white man laughed; and then, when his tongue served him again, the helmsman

would break off from the text and rap out a stream of poisonous cursings.

At last he climaxed these by the only vituperation which no American can listen to unmoved, and the man on the coach-roof dropped his indolence like a flash, and was on him before he could resist. The aggressor was lusty, and he shook the steersman as a big dog shakes a rat, with ponderous wrenches; and because the sloop carried a strong weather helm, when the tiller was let go, she ran up into the wind with her canvas slatting wildly.

"You snake-mouthed little skunk! you'd say that to me, would you? I thought I learned you once before how far you might go. You've had one eye gouged for this game less'n a month back, and if you fling your twisted, stuttering tongue at me any more, by gum, I'll pocket the other!"

The blacks on the fore-deck chuckled and spluttered; but the big man hove an iron bucket at them, with curt command to "quit that ye-hawin'," which they did with a yell and a sudden veiling of ivory. Then, by an indolent sprawling of the arms and legs, he gained his basking-place again on the top of the cabin-roof, and once more the steersman got the sloop under command.

The next three boards were made in silence, save for the creaking of gear when she went about; and then the one-eyed man broke out again—

"You're sure it wasn't a Government bo-o-o-at, Hank?"

"Government be sugared! She wasn't the right build, to start with. Besides, if Government knew this channel at all, you bet it'd be said so in all the papers. And *she* did know it, or she wouldn't have gone buzzing past at six knots without a leadsman. Seems to me someone's split, and she's some darned Britisher come to cut out our game for themselves."

"You tire me. Plume-hunting's illegal by these bub-bub-blessed bird laws, and so's selling whisky to Injuns. As it is, we've trouble enough to sneak in and out of the 'Glades in this sus-sus-sus-s-s-lip of a sloop, so how in snakes d'you expect they'd do it in a thousand-ton——"

Here the man's infirmity blocked his speech for a minute. He snarled out: "Oh, I've no use for a blank puttyhead like you!"

Hank laughed, and put tobacco into his mouth. "Go it!" he said—"go it, right close to the end if you like; but bring up short of that, or I'll gouge you, sure's death!"

The steersman grinned a spasm of fury. He longed much to use again the unpardonable phrase, but he forbore. He felt that his friend would be as good as his word. So he ceased from speech altogether, and a negro on the fore-deck enlivened the silence with the Jordan Hymn,

giving full value to every possible shake and turn.

A porpoise surged past them, making for the open after a day's fresh-water fishing, and once or twice an alligator's eyebrows and snout showed like knots of black wood floating up against the current, for this was territory where the skin-hunter's rifle had not scared them altogether into night-work. The sloop's pace up-stream was small and it was not till just before nightfall that she rounded a cape where high black pines stood up like soldiers on parade around the water's edge, and there saw the intruder. The steamer was grounded on a sandbank athwart the stream, and lay, with a two-foot list, away from the current. Not until they were close aboard of her could those on the sloop see the gold lettering on her counter.

"B-b-both lifeboats gone! Say, that's rum!"

"*'Port Edes, of London,'*" Hank read. "*Port Edes?* I seem to know that name." He swung his long legs down over the cabin doorway, and sat staring at his companion with open-mouthed wonder. "Hallo, Nutt!" he said, "what's wrong now! I haven't seen you wear that kind o' face before. You couldn't look pleaseder if I'd said your rich uncle had gone dead. There's no pards of ours aboard of her, is there?"

The one-eyed man's face was lit up with an unholy joy. "Don't you know?" he stuttered

out. "The biz was in all the papers. That steamboat was bringing out half a million of sovereigns. Her port was New Orleans; and she's got here. By gum, I s'pose they think they're going to s-s-steal it all by themselves."

"Steal? What do you mean?"

"Oh, you idiot! What would they come here at all for if it was all right?"

"Who's they?" inquired Hank.

"I gug-gug-guess we shall know that soon," returned the one-eyed man grimly. "Hi, you niggers there, forward! I s'pose you got razors hid somewhere in yer pants?"

"Say," drawled his friend, "you'd mebbe better go slow over this deal, Mr. Billy Nutt. The steamer does look asleep, but if you start making your self ugly too soon, somebody may wake up and pull off guns at us."

"I've been mum-mum-missed before."

"So've I, sonny. That's why there's all the more chance of being hit now. You go slow, Billy Nutt; just go slow. If they see that ugly face of yours and hear you talk, somebody'll shoot, sure's death."

"Shoot or no shoot," retorted the man at the tiller, "I'm going to have some of their plunder before a dozen hours are over, or else be a deader. I never had a chance like this in all my life before, and I'll never geg-geg-get another."

"You bet not," agreed his friend. "Nor'll I. That's why I'll stand in with you over this deal down to the last chip. I guess it's the one soft thing I've been looking for all through a lifetime. I thought once I was going to make my pile out of breaking Monte Carlo. Then it was a corner in pork. Then we tried to stick up a mail train and raid the dollars out of the express car. But all these operations kinder weakened when it came to the point. I s'pose we didn't put enough jump into them. But we'll not get euchred for want of that here. No, siree. You and me, Billy Nutt, 'll either come out topside over this deal, or else die in our boots. You hear me. I reckon," he added, in a lower voice, "we can count well on the niggers, too. They're not exactly a camp-meeting crowd. They're toughs that a racket like this'll suit as nat'ral as chicken-stealing."

He bent forward over the coach-roof and communicated the scheme to the negroes in a few words. The mobile African faces changed like children's. They became savage and animal-like. The fellow who but a short while before had carried such a look of touching devotion as he trolled out the Jordan Hymn, ceased almost to be human. In a flash he had turned to a lustful, savage beast, with glinting yellow eyeballs, gripping a razor with one black paw and ready to

grapple anything with the other. The veneer of American civilization had slid from him like some tattered wrap. He was a fitting specimen of the most dangerous "made" race of which this world can at present boast.

Even Hank was half alarmed at the furies he had unchained. "See here, fellows!" he said, as an after-thought. "Just take care which way you run when we get aboard that steamer, and don't get foul of Billy Nutt and me. If you try any of your blame' nigger carving games on us, I guess you'll turn into cold meat quicker'n you can wink. Nutt and me are the handiest men with guns in this section of Florida."

"All right, boss; no shirt!" said he of the razor.

"Well, I was just telling you," returned the big man. "And now, quiet, all hands. If we can slip aboard without anybody hailing us, it'll be healthier for us, whatever it may be for other people."

Once more the noises of the forest, and the occasional creaking of the sloop's gear, made up the only sounds; and from beyond the western tree-tops the brazen sun took a final glare at them before it dived to rest for the night. The negro who had been singing the hymn sat on the fore-deck, and stropped a razor on the bare sole-leather of his foot. The two white men re-charged their revolvers.

CHAPTER XV.

RESULTS IN LONDON.

"How awfully ghastly!" said Amy Rivers.

"Yes," said Fairfax; "those anarchist people ought to be shot down like dangerous wild beasts whenever they open their mouths! Think of it! not only a fine ship, but half a million in specie, blotted out of existence by this murderous bomb! It will come fearfully heavy on some of the underwriters. There will be a black pay-day at Lloyd's when they settle up over this. You never saw such excitement as there is in the City. Papers were selling at half a crown apiece!"

"And is it certain that poor Mr. Onslow is drowned?"

"I'm afraid, practically so. The two lifeboats were picked up next morning, and their crews taken into Mobile. When they came to count heads it was found that the captain and Onslow and one of the engine-room hands were missing. In the hurry of the escape they seem to have got into neither lifeboat. The telegram says that no

other boat would have lived a minute in the sea that was running at the time, even if one had been lowered. And the mate, who writes, does not think that this was even attempted, because the *Port Edes* sank before the two lifeboats had driven out of sight. We had a private cablegram at the office before I left, and that told how other steamers crossing that part of the Gulf had been on the look-out, but up to then not even so much as a scrap of wreckage had been sighted. So I fear it is past a doubt that she sank like a stone in deep water, and took those poor fellows down with her."

"It is horribly sad, especially when one remembers what I heard this morning, Hamilton. The girl Mr. Onslow went wild about six years ago is out in Florida this minute, and free. Duvernay, the man she married, died six months ago of malarial fever. You know Mr. Onslow was engaged to her just after he left Cambridge and went as an *attaché*, and was desperately fond of her, as I imagined he could be; and when her people forced her into marrying the other fellow, he threw up his post and wandered into all the most out-of-the-way corners of the earth to try and forget things. What makes me so interested is this: I've just found out that she was a Miss Mabel Kildare before she was married, and when I was a child I used to know her sister Elsie very

well indeed. In fact, I believe we were some sort of cousins, and for half a year we had the same governess together, and were as intimate as two children could be. Then her sister married Mr. Duvernay, who had a colonial appointment, and Elsie went with them abroad, and we dropped completely out of touch with one another. Strange, isn't it, that I should hear of her again the same day that brings news of poor Mr. Onslow's death?"

"It's a small world this," said Fairfax, sententiously, "and coincidences are the commonest things in it. I suppose in a novel the pair of them ought to have come together, and forgiven the past, and married, and settled down in a villa residence with ivy and clematis attachment, and lived happily ever afterwards. Unfortunately, real life is balder and far less romantic."

"You seem out of spirits," said his *fiancée*, linking her fingers over his arm.

"I suppose I am. To begin with, this *Port Edes* business isn't calculated to enliven one; and then, on the top of that, I've had another taste of your blessed guardian's business methods, which has nearly sickened me out of the office altogether. You know about this 'Brothers Steamship Company' which he is trying to float? Well, we had a preliminary meeting to-day—quite a thousand people, and all, comparatively

speaking, poor. They were, for the most part, the gang he preaches to on Sunday, with a sprinkling of skippers out of work, and other sea-faring folk who had saved a trifle of money.

“ Shelf commenced the business with prayer, which is right enough at its proper time, but struck me as being particularly out of place there. The audience, however, groaned approval, and their confidence in the man seemed to be strengthened. He followed this up with a clever speech about the profits to be made out of the modern sea-carrying trade, and enlarged upon the notorious fact that the losses of the business largely arose from the lack of interest on the part of the ship-masters and other officers. This last, he said, would be entirely removed in the Brothers S. S. Co., because, by the articles of association, no man would hold a responsible position on any one of their vessels who was not an actual shareholder of the company. And then he pointed out that there was an eight per cent. dividend guaranteed on preference stock, and a certain fifteen or eighteen per cent. on the ordinary, and wound up with another dose of cant. The company, he said, would not be alone content with earning income for its bond-holders; it would have as its equal object the spreading of the Gospel and the civilization of England to the uttermost parts of the globe.

"Then the meeting cheered and amenned, and wrote out an application for 10,000 £5 shares then and there in the room on forms which were handed round; and down your blessed guardian went on his knees again, and prayed for grace to bless his efforts; and when the poor fools dispersed, Mr. Theodore Shelf and I drove back to the offices.

" 'Look here,' I said to him; 'you've put me down on the directorate of this thing with a salary of £1000 a year. I want to resign.'

" 'What on earth for?'

" 'Oh! Shall we say I haven't sufficient loose money to take up enough shares?'

" 'But,' he said quickly, 'you needn't take up many. You can draw your first quarter's salary and pay that back to the company's bankers on your first call. That will qualify you.'

" 'No,' I said, 'I'm not going to do that. I'm going to be mixed up with this new company in no degree whatever. Flatly, I don't believe in the thing one bit. It's a notorious fact that freights are so low just now that thousands of tons of shipping is laid up because it can't be run at a profit; and if you put more in commission, freights will tumble down still lower.'

" 'You speak from your ignorance,' he said. 'I should remind you that I am by far an older man, and have a much deeper experience. The business of Marmaduke Rivers and Shelf is a lasting

monument of what my humble talents can accomplish, and you will some day see for yourself the newer company on an equal footing. Did you not notice what enthusiastic confidence in its prosperity those humble friends of mine showed this afternoon ? ’

“ ‘ A fat lot they know about the shipping business,’ said I. ‘ In the mood you worked them up to, they’d have believed in an advertising stock-broker’s circular if only there were a text at the head of the page.’ ”

“ Shelf pulled the check-string, and his brougham stopped against the kerb. ‘ Mr. Fairfax,’ said he, ‘ your attitude pains me. Let us part here for the time, and let us both pray that when next we meet you may be in a more Christian mind.’ Whereupon out I stepped, and came along here to Park Lane. Amy dear, I don’t like the look of things at all. The other business, the ‘ Oceanic Steam Transport Company,’ as it is called officially, is by no means in a healthy condition, and, remembering that, it seems to me that starting this new company is something very nearly approaching a swindle. I believe that Theodore Shelf is finding out that he is in low water, and is getting desperate.”

“ I don’t know about the last,” replied the girl, thoughtfully ; “ but as for being in low water, there I think you are wrong. Every week here

they seem to spend more money than they did the week before. Mrs. Shelf was at a picture sale yesterday, and bought two old masters at four thousand guineas apiece, and it isn't likely she'd throw away that sum on what is absolutely and entirely a luxury unless money were pretty plentiful with her.

"It can't go on at this pace," said Fairfax. "I know what the limits of the business are, and I'm certain it can't stand the drain on them which all this gorgeousness must entail. Last year the profits were almost nil, and yet did Mrs. Shelf retrench at all? Not a bit. She goes in for more and more display every week she lives. This pace must bring about a wreck, and if the 'Oceanic Steam Transport Company' goes down, it is an absolute certainty that this new 'Brothers Company' will be swamped with it.'

"And then?"

"More than a thousand poor people, for the most of them old, will find that the savings of a lifetime have vanished into nothingness before their eyes. It is an awful thing even to think such a suspicion against a man ; but the idea is growing upon me, and Theodore Shelf saw what I thought when he showed me out of his brougham this afternoon."

"Then what," asked the girl in a horrified whisper, "will you do?"

“ Nothing. What can I do ? To breathe a word of it aloud would be a libel ; and if I did not get sent to jail, they would pack me off to Hanwell as a malicious madman. Shelf’s name is as good as a banknote in the City this day, and, for everybody’s sake, I trust that I have wronged him foully, and that it may always continue so. But, Amy dear, I have a heavy foreboding on me that in less than half a year’s time there will be a mob of wretched people shooting themselves or going to the workhouse because he has ruined them, and they haven’t the pluck or the thews left to commence life afresh.”

CHAPTER XVI.

FOR THE BIRTHDAY LIST.

MR. THEODORE SHELF was a *gourmand* of the first water. He preached most violently against all people who drank to excess, and seemed scarcely to discriminate between these and other people who were decorously moderate. He included them all in one sweeping anathema, and rammed home his charges with countless texts always once a Sunday, and usually on several weekdays as well. He was a powerful exhorter in his own particular narrow groove, was Mr. Theodore Shelf, and a vast number of people believed in him, and put out their savings to usury under his directions.

But he was, as I say, a *gourmand* of note. He paid his *chef* £300 a year, and would have thought himself permanently injured in constitution if his truffles by accident happened to be English, and not from Perigord Forest. He over-ate himself habitually, and made no particular disguise about it. There is no influential society to make a national sin of bestial over-feeding, or otherwise Mr. Theodore Shelf would doubtless have posed as

an ascetic in public, and—kept biscuits and a jar of *foie gras* beside the brandy-bottle in the safe. There wasn't a man in England who knew better how to get the votes of his clique, and their influence, and the handling of their money. There was not a man in Europe less inclined to mortify the flesh or undergo exertion without adequate return.

He was not a vastly clever man, if one came to add him up. He had climbed from a humble clerkship to a very giddy eminence by the nice exercise of three strong faculties. He had great discrimination, he was a quick thinker, and he was brilliantly unscrupulous.

When he saw a move that would eventually pay him, he had the wit to single it out in an instant from a thousand others, and decide on the road which led to his own personal profit. Then he disregarded the sneers of the well-dressed crowd—rather courted them, in fact, when they enabled him to pose as a martyr—and went in for the project heart, tongue, and soul. He could put such beautiful unction into the performance that even the most bigoted of the enemy never thought of questioning his own personal sanctity; and meanwhile the great earnest mob of his followers were chorusing the man's praises with fervor and fanatical zeal.

It has been stated that Mr. Theodore Shelf was

a man entirely wanting the saving salt of humor. But this I think is wrong. When he was alone he would take George on his knee, and whisper in that small animal's ear, and call up a sardonic expression amongst the smug, sanctimonious lines of his face that was not carried there in outer life. At times, too, he would even laugh—a new, gleeful laugh; far different from the saintly reproving smile which was the only sign of mirth that ever illuminated his features before a more talkative confidant. But then George was taciturn; he could express whole pages by one quick pucker of the nose and half a tail-wag; and he was never known to gossip. Perhaps it was because he made such a prodigiously safe confidant that Mr. Theodore Shelf was so fond of George.

In social standing George was not a gentleman. Nature had intended him for the professional extinction of rats, and given him a preternatural gutter cleverness. Fate had him surrounded with affluence and regular meals. The pursuit of rats was forbidden him; battles with canine acquaintances were discouraged; and his one dissipation was sneaking away from his residence and making love to the barmaid in an adjacent public-house in return for biscuits and sugar. As a general result he waxed portly, and could look upon most kinds of rascality with a lenient eye,

and perfectly understood why Mr. Shelf's private brandy-bottle lodged in retirement from the public view.

Now, Mr. Theodore Shelf's dinner parties—as sent up by the inventive and excellent *chef* aforesaid—were celebrated all over London, which, despite all the charges laid against it by Continental neighbors, is a city which does contain some people who appreciate the exquisite in food. Shelf, who despised no means of furthering his material interests, naturally traded upon his celebrity in this matter, and distributed his dinner invitations with a keen eye to some adequate return. But he was usually content to leave the actual making-up of all parties to his wife. He could quite trust her in this matter. She was not likely to expend a single cover uselessly. She had a wonderfully nice appreciation of the main chance. A clever woman, Mrs. Shelf.

On the night of the day that the Brothers Steamship Company was floated she had arranged a dinner-table at her house which is destined to live down through time. There was a great Cabinet Minister present, who, as the chief guest, took her down to dinner; and there was also in the room the Ambassador from one of the greater Continental Courts, with whom the Minister had, after dinner, ten minutes of quiet, informal talk in the corner of the drawing-room. That talk laid

the groundwork of a certain international agreement, afterwards elaborated, which has never yet been made public. But some day it will be sprung upon Europe with a crash, and a whirlwind of wonder; and then the papers will refer to Mrs. Theodore Shelf's dinner-table as a manufactory of history.

Be it confessed, however, that Mrs. Shelf had not asked the two to meet through any high-minded wish to better the Empire. She was singularly untrammelled by patriotism of that variety. The principal Power whose betterment she had at heart was the House of Shelf, as consisting of husband and self; and when she sat down at the head of her table, and watched the great Minister next her unfold his napkin, she made up her mind to do great deeds that night.

She did not rush headlong to the attack. She had prepared her ground skilfully, and knew how to play her game with due deliberation. On the other side of the Minister was Amy Rivers—a bright, sprightly personage, of whom he was extremely fond, and to whose conversation his hostess cleverly dismissed him before they were half-way through the *hors d'œuvres*.

Oysters *à la Sibérienne* followed, and as the great man was selecting the plump natives he fancied from their tray of ice, he turned round to Mrs. Shelf, as though to engage in talk with her.

But her time was not yet ripe. The Minister was a professed *gourmet*, and the wines that night were the best the world could produce. Theodore Shelf made no objection to these. He professed to abstain from wines himself, but he provided them for others, as he did billiards. And Mrs. Shelf trusted that the glorious vintages would sweep the austerity from the Minister's soul.

The Minister sipped his Chablis, and his eye kindled.

"I shouldn't like," he said to Amy Rivers, "to be a poor man, and not know people, and not go out anywhere. The sweets of life are its pleasant surprises. That's the best wine of its name in England this minute."

"I am not," replied Miss Rivers, "going to talk food with you. If you want that, you must shout down the table at Mr. Shelf."

"Oh, youth, youth!" said the Minister, "how much you miss! At one time I thought Dublin porter an excellent tipple to drink with my oysters; and as for you, my dear, you don't trouble your head about it at all. I used to think I'd like to marry you, supposing Heaven made me single again. But now——"

"Now, I suppose, I shall have to put up with Hamilton Fairfax, as arranged. Well, there are worse fates."

"You seem to bear up under it wonderfully."

"Don't I? You can come to the wedding, if you'll promise not to look too woebegone."

"I sha'n't come. I shall send you an inexpensive present with black edges to it."

"So long as it isn't *entrée* dishes. We've tons of them already. I thought I'd mention it, because one knows how your tastes lie."

The great man squeezed lemon on to the last of his oysters, and ate it with a satisfied nod of the head.

"Date fixed?" he asked. "If it is, break the sad news to me gently. "Don't be too cruel."

"The date's fixed within limits. We've bought a place to live in: and, if it's ready, we shall be married the day I come of age."

"Bought a place, have you? Come, this looks like business. Where is it? Got a good cook? Any shooting? Going to ask me down? Because, if you do, I'll come and teach you how to make me comfortable."

"Yes, I believe you could do that last. Those papers which don't call you the Pope of Politics every morning, say you're the most incapable man in Britain in most matters; but I never heard that the most vicious of them ever accused you of living in discomfort. You've a wonderful knack of looking after yourself."

"Haven't I? Don't spoil your health with salted almonds; nibble one of these Riviera

olives. Life is made for suiting your own tastes as much as possible, and, where practical, making your neighbors pay for them. Why isn't Fairfax here to-night? Are we all too big for him?"

"Hamilton is away on business, looking after the place we're going to buy in Kent. I shall see him later. But just now I'm having a holiday," said Miss Rivers. "I wanted to flirt with you. You're safe and amusing—amusing, that is, when you keep off the *menu*. Where are you going to after here to-night?"

"Oh, to a horrible political thing, where we shall all be good, and talk humbug, and be bored to death. If I hadn't chanced to be in the Cabinet, I should probably have gone to see a prize-fight." His eye traveled down the table to where Theodore Shelf was looking saintly, with his head on one side, and washing his large white hands with invisible soap. "I'd chance it, my dear, and go, if I thought I could manage to meet——"

Amy Rivers had followed his glance. She turned to him with a demure smile.

"Well," she said, "who?"

"Oh, just one or two of my colleagues on the same side of the House. Hang it all, Amy, the fellows can't always be what they set up for in front of their clients."

Miss Rivers laughed.

"You're a bold, bad lot," she said. "I know

I shall see you in the police-court one of these days for breaking lamp-posts, or running away with a hansom cab. There's a vein of wickedness in you that's completely thrown away in a Cabinet Minister."

His lordship grinned, and turned to Mrs. Shelf. He admired Mrs. Shelf because she was an extremely handsome woman. He rather dreaded her just now, because he knew she wanted something out of him. And he had to talk to her because it was policy to do so.

The complete Art of Spreading Butter is not one to be mastered by everybody. In the lower grades it is easy: any one can tickle a fool. But when the subject has wallowed in all the cleverest kinds of flattery for many years of his life, then it is a different matter. If you set about your work in a clumsy way, he begins at once to mildly hate you. If you only half do it, the man is resentful because he has not received his due.

Mrs. Shelf avoided the pitfalls. The great Minister stayed suspicious—she could not alter that—but she put him in a most excellent humor with himself; and the dinner was surpassing good. He took kümmel and cognac for his liqueur, and she watched an ecstasy flicker to his face as he drained the little glass. The hum of the talk rose high in the room, and her voice met his ear

alone. He heard her asking that Theodore Shelf might be elevated to the House of Lords.

He put the glass to the table, still holding the stem between his fingers. He looked at it thoughtfully, shaking his head the while.

"My husband is a power you can't neglect," she continued. "He always votes straight for your party."

"Yes, he is *one* of us," the Minister admitted softly, with a gentle emphasis on the numeral.

"So far. But he has his principles to consider. He might find it necessary, from the dictates of his conscience, to separate himself from you on one or two matters in the next session. I'm afraid his following would go with him. You know he has vast influence with a certain class."

The Minister stretched out lazy fingers, and took a saltspoon, and made two little neat heaps of salt on the table-cloth; and, after consideration, added a third.

"Pooh!" said Mrs. Shelf, "there are five certain, and I could tell you their names if you didn't know them already. My husband makes six. That counts twelve votes on a division. But, of course, the Government is strong enough to stand it."

The Minister thoughtfully built four salted almonds into an arch, and piled two more at the back of them. "Cave!" he murmured, and then

with a tap of the finger sprawled them on the table-cloth. "There's nothing certain in this life," he said.

"There are caves and caves; and some bring down Governments. My husband and his followers are extreme men, and, as I have heard you say yourself, there is no class of creature so resolute and bigoted as a fanatic. If once an extreme man makes up his mind, all the argument on earth will not change him. But perhaps you don't mind a dissolution? Perhaps you've done so well, and passed so many popular measures since you've been in power, that you'd like to meet the country at once?"

The Minister grinned like a man in pain. "A knighthood," he said, "is a very fascinating thing. It is the reward of the faithful. I think—I say I think—I could lay my hands upon one spare knighthood, and might give it away if I saw an adequate return."

Mrs. Shelf smiled amusedly at the diamonds on her comely wrist.

"A knighthood? That's the thing City men have, isn't it, when they make money by selling patent mousetraps, or happen to be Lord Mayors, or something like that? Unfortunately, my husband would not qualify for a knighthood. He is not a small pedler. His—what shall I say?"

"Operations are more extensive?"

"Precisely. He does things on a fine scale. For instance, he has, as I said, at this very moment twelve votes at his command, which might make a very considerable difference on a division. You see, conscience is a great thing with him. He could never neglect it. But if he was in the Upper House . . ."

The great Minister could comfortably have shuddered. He was a peer himself, and was jealous for his caste. But, as it was, he repressed this piece of outward emotion, and contented himself with saying "No," quietly, softly, and with entire decision. Then, with a swirl of brilliant talk there was no arresting, he deliberately changed the conversation. Mrs. Shelf submitted. She had another card still to play. And until she picked up the ladies with her glance, and led them away up-stairs, they two spoke of oranges from many points of view. They agreed that the large tangerines of Majorca were the only oranges fit to eat in England, and discussed the various means of getting them imported *via* Marseilles without suffering them to lose more than a fraction of their flavor.

The Minister, fatuous man, thought that she had given in to him, and chuckled inwardly at his victory, and when the ladies had gone, he turned to his next-door neighbor and talked on the ethics

of Irish cock shooting with a light and easy mind. But for the next move in the drawing-room he was frankly unprepared. He had come to Park Lane on the clear understanding that a *tête-à-tête* was to be contrived for him with the Ambassador ; for it is in this way that the great treaties which dally with the fate of nations receive their birth-push. I do not say that the matter of peace or war depended upon that interview ; but sufficient hung on it to make the great Minister very anxious, because he had been deputed by his colleagues in the Cabinet to bring this thing about, and had solemnly undertaken the charge.

And, lo ! the chance of this momentous minute's chat was to be withheld. Mrs. Shelf, calm, clever, magnificent, came to his elbow the moment he entered the drawing-room, and stayed there. He was frosty, he was inattentive, he was almost rude, but he could not shake her off. She was cool, insistent, fluent. She made him sit on a sofa by her side, and laughed almost openly at the attempts he made to shake loose from his bondage.

At last he broke off in the middle of an aimless sentence, and looked her between the eyes. She returned the glance most squarely. There was a pause between them, and then—

“By the way, baronetcy ?” he murmured.

It was nothing on earth to do with what they

had been speaking about the minute previously, but the sentence did not require a footnote to explain it further.

“H’m!” she said. “When?”

“In the next Birthday List.”

“Thanks. Now you go into the further drawing-room and talk to the Ambassador, and I will clear the people away. I suppose ten minutes will be enough?”

“Ample,” said the great Minister, rising. Then he added: “By Jove! you are a clever woman. You’re cleverer than your husband.”

“I know I am,” said Mrs. Shelf.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE MATTER OF A TRUST.

"MR. FAIRFAX, sir, to see you."

"Say that I cannot see him."

The butler hesitated a moment, and then begged Mr. Shelf's pardon, and hinted that Fairfax seemed to have anticipated some such message.

"He said, sir, I was to explain it was on very important business, or he would not have called so late at night. And he said, too, sir"—here the butler hesitated again—"that he *must* see you."

"Tell him——," Shelf began passionately; but there he stopped, and the rest of the sentence was lost. Fairfax had walked into the room.

The butler stood his ground, glancing with nervous respect from one to the other, till Shelf waved him to the door, through which he vanished noiselessly, with an apologetic sigh of relief. Then the other two faced one another.

"I must say, sir," the shipowner began, with icy politeness, "that after what has occurred be-

tween us this day your intrusion strikes me as vastly wanting in taste. Of course, as a Christian, it has been my duty to forgive you the injurious thoughts which you bore against me; but, as a frail human man, I confess to have been so wounded by them that the sight of you tempts me to the sin of anger afresh. But, perhaps, sir, you have come here to express contrition, and to ask that I will hand back the resignation of the directorate which you so rudely thrust upon me."

"I have come," replied Fairfax, shortly, "for neither one thing nor the other. I am not calling upon you in your City capacity at all. I want to speak with you in your position of trustee to the lady whom I am now shortly going to marry."

"She has sent you?"

"She is perfectly aware of my errand. A property in Kent has suddenly come into the market which will go for a comparatively low sum for cash down. I have been spending the day examining it, and meanwhile my solicitor has been going through the deeds. The place will suit us to the ground, and the title is as clear as could be wished for."

"So you wish to buy this property with your wife's money?" Shelf asked with a sneer.

"I am not disguising from myself the fact that Amy is an heiress. At the same time, I am not altogether a pauper myself. But I don't think

we two need go into that part of the money question, Mr. Shelf. As a point of fact (as you know quite well), she and I first met one another abroad, and fell in love, and got engaged without knowing a single word about our mutual outlook, social or financial. The point here is that Amy wants to become part purchaser in this Kent property with myself, and on her behalf I come to you for the formal permission. You know by the terms of her father's will she was to have all her wishes with regard to the property taken into consideration after she reached the age of twenty-one, but was still to be under the semi-guidance of the trustees till she reached her twenty-third birthday."

"I am only one of the trustees," said Shelf. "You must arrange to bring my co-trustee up to meet me, and then I will talk the matter over with him."

"I have called on that reverend gentleman before I came to you," said Fairfax, "and he quite meets with mine and Amy's views. He will come up to town and see you himself in the morning at the City office. But in the mean time he sends his permission in this letter."

Fairfax selected a paper from his pocket-book and handed it to Mr. Shelf. "I suppose you recognize the signature," he said.

Shelf started, the paper rustling between his

large white fingers. He had a sentence on the end of his tongue, but with an effort he swallowed it. Then, with a frown and a quick catching of the breath, he turned to the letter and read it through. As it chanced, Fairfax had seen that momentary look of disquiet, and being a young man of some penetration, he argued down to the reason of it. "Why," he asked himself, "should the old hypocrite be upset when I 'supposed he recognized his co-trustee's handwriting?' I'm bothered if I can see any definite reason, but there must be something pretty fishy somewhere. Theodore Shelf is not the man to let slip that kind of nervousness without some very excellent cause. I'm beginning to think that those of Amy's interests which are in his hands will be none the worse for being a little looked after."

Mr. Theodore Shelf glanced up from the letter. "Of course you understand," he said, "that I cannot act upon an informal communication like this? My co-trustee is a most excellent Christian, but, I regret to say, a bad man of business."

"Pernicious, to say the least of him. He seems to have the flimsiest notion of the use of paper and signatures. Still, he means entirely well, and that is why I do not want to worry him unduly. So, with permission, Mr. Shelf, and to take the burden of details off your shoulders as well as off his, I will instruct my own solicitor to

see to all the preliminaries as to which stock will bear selling out of best."

"You take it for granted," said the shipowner sourly, "that I shall not put my veto on this scheme for spending my ward's money."

"Why should you? You have given your consent to the marriage, and whatever may be your personal feelings towards me, at any rate, you like her. She wishes to marry me, and intends to do that anyway; she wishes for this estate, and I do not see that you have any reasonable grounds for refusing to gratify her wish; besides, as an investment, the thing is as good as a first mortgage or Three per cent. Corporation Stock."

"There are many grave objections to this course," said Shelf.

"Then, perhaps," said Fairfax, "you will tell me what they are?"

"I do not see that I am called upon to do anything of the kind."

"There we differ. Moreover, Mr. Shelf, you force me to a very unpleasant conclusion."

"And what, sir, might that be?"

"Well, this," said Fairfax, with a significant stare: "You've got that money so—shall we say, securely—locked up, that it isn't readily available for this new investment."

"You are talking like a child," said Mr. Shelf, noisily.

"I am talking like a plain business man," Fairfax retorted, "who intends to take reasonable care of his future wife's property. I think that will explain my views; and, as nothing more need be said on that matter, I will leave you. The other trustee will call upon you at midday to-morrow, and I shall make it my duty to accompany him. So, for the present, sir, *au revoir*."

Fairfax left the room, and Mr. Theodore Shelf lay back in a swivel writing chair. Mechanically his fingers stretched out and dallied with a book which lay on the table. It was a Bradshaw. Once, indeed, he opened it, and turned up the pages of the express service between London and Southampton; and, for a full half-hour held it with his finger as a page-marker; but at the end of that time he flung the book savagely across the room, and stood up with clenched fists and the veins standing out of his forehead.

"Amy may thank Fairfax for saving her property," he muttered, "and a thousand people will curse him for doing it. I believe I'm a fool not to bolt now with what I've got, because nothing short of a miracle can bring me up again. Still, there's the money subscribed by those poor wretches for this new company yet in hand, and that will stave off the immediate present. There's just a chance that Onslow's *coup* may be

realized on in time, and, if that comes off, I'm all right again. And if it doesn't, there's the estancia on the Rio Paraguay always ready. Yes, George, old chap, that it is. Snug and warm, beyond worries, safe from extradition. I'll risk it."

The wire-haired terrier was rubbing against his leg. He lifted the dog on to the cushion of an easy chair, and went to his safe. He took from that a bundle of papers, and spread them on his writing-table.

They were the trust deeds and other papers connected with Miss Amy Rivers' property. Some of them were documents distinctly worth locking up, because if the Public Prosecutor could have run his eye through the collection for one short five minutes, he would infallibly have procured for the saintly Mr. Theodore Shelf seven complete years of penal servitude.

It is an unpleasant thing to level such a hint against so good a man; but a fact or so will show solid reason for it. During the two preceding years—partly through depression in trade, partly through his wife's broadcast extravagance—Theodore Shelf had found himself in desperate straits for money. He had raised funds this way and that by all legitimate means; had plunged, but with evil fortune; and finally had been reduced to making his daily income by less reputable means. For long he had laid covetous eyes on

the fortune of his late partner, Marmaduke Rivers, which was held in trust for the daughter by himself and a canon of Winchester; and at last, in a moment of desperation, he determined to have the use of it. The co-trustee was a man who had taken a double-first at Oxford, and apparently spent all his life's energies over the process. He had settled down into an amiable country parson, who bred prize-bantams, and wrote books on Armenian folk-lore. He was extremely upright, vastly unsuspicious, and on matters of business possessed an ignorance of unusual profundity. He respected Theodore Shelf, and disliked him with an equal intenseness.

When Shelf made up his mind to tamper with the Rivers property, he did not go through the formality of asking this good gentleman's leave and permission. He simply forged himself a power of attorney, signed it with the excellent canon's name and set to work. Being a man who never did anything by halves, he did not take two bites at the cherry. He annexed the whole of his ward's property, lock, stock, and barrel, and paid in the usual interest to her bankers with entire regularity. Humanly speaking, there was not a chance of his being found out; and when fortune smiled on him again he had every intention of repaying to the uttermost farthing what he had taken. As has been said, he liked Amy

Rivers extremely, and, if he had not had his worthy self to consider, he would have been the last person in the world to do her an injury.

And now this pestilent fellow Fairfax must need step in, bristling with suspicion, and evidently intending to have money or an inquiry. Of course, the latter was a thing which Mr. Shelf could not stand for one minute. At the first glance it would be shown that the trust property did not exist in its former state, and that the interest had been paid into the bank out of Mr. Shelf's own pocket. And so there were only two things which could be done; either bolt forthwith, or pay the plundered trust out of some other fund, and hope that the Providence which guards knaves would pull things straight again. Mr. Shelf had chosen to take the latter course, and it was the money subscribed by the wretched shareholders of the Brothers Steamship Company which was alienated by him to make good the property of Miss Amy Rivers.

It required not many strokes of the pen to do this; but, after restitution had been made, Mr. Theodore Shelf commenced coquetting with a more delicate piece of business. He desired to hide his tracks. It was his wish that, even if the worst came, and he had to fly the country as a detected swindler, no one should know that he had tampered with his own ward's trust money.

It seems almost laughable that the man should have put himself to this piece of pains. In the vast sweep of his other ponderous frauds, this very natural one might well pass without special obloquy from the great shorn public. But it was not for the general ruck of his victims that Shelf was working then. He had sacrificed a thousand (under compulsion) to repay one; and, having made repayment, he wanted to cancel the odium of robbery. Next to himself and his dog, he probably loved Amy Rivers better than anything in all the world; and, if the worst came, and he had to go, it would be pleasanter for him to think that she, at least, would have nothing but kind memories of him. She would know quite well that he might have included her fortune in his other robberies, because Fairfax would tell her that, if she did not guess it for herself; and she would feel a kindness towards him for his forbearance.

Of course, he would be getting this genial sentiment under false pretenses, but that was a trifle which counted as nothing to Mr. Theodore Shelf. Your true hypocrite deludes no one more perfectly and artistically than himself when he sets squarely about it.

The time was long past midnight when he had finished tampering with the last of the papers on his writing-table; and, as he passed the blotting-

paper over his final forgery, he heard the clash of the front door in the hall below. Quickly bunching the papers together, he put them into the safe, locked it, threw himself into an easy chair, and picked up a quarto volume of his own published sermons. He was serenely reading these when his wife sailed majestically into the room, with Amy Rivers at her side.

The girl stepped forward, took both of his hands in hers, and shook them warmly. "All congratulations," she said. "I've only just heard. May I call you 'Sir Theodore' in advance?"

Shelf let the book slide to the floor, and sat up staring first at one and then the other. "I am much obliged to you, Amy dear," he said at last; "but, upon my word, I don't know what you mean."

"It's out!" she said. "Everybody was talking about it to-night. You'll be gazetted in the next Birthday List. And not a trumpery knighthood, either. You're to be a full-blown baronet—no less."

Theodore Shelf lay back in his chair with a very queer expression on his face. He put his white fingers together under his chin, and stared curiously at his wife. "Your doing, I suppose, Laura?"

"You may thank me for it entirely," she replied with a smiling bow. "I arranged for it here with

the Minister; and at the two places where we looked in at afterwards, I told the news to three of my dearest friends in the very strictest of confidence. Consequently, it is all over London to-night, and will be in all the papers in England to-morrow. Would you like to congratulate me?"

"I'll wait," said the shipowner, "till I see you Lady Shelf. The title is not formally given over for a fortnight, and between now and then so much may happen. Man is but a frail creature."

"Oh, for goodness' sake," said Mrs. Shelf, disgustedly, "don't cant now. When you are Sir Theodore I can't have you disgracing me by preaching and holding forth to those low people you used to know. You must cut all that connection. Good heavens, Theodore, you can't like it! And there's really no more to be got out of that sort of thing. You've used those dreary, goody-goody folks, and made your fortune out of them, and let that suffice. Now, if you want to get on further, you've got to pick up with another set. Don't you understand?"

For reply Theodore Shelf burst into a sudden wild cackle of laughter.

His wife drew back a step, half-scared. She had scarcely ever heard the man laugh once in all her life with him; never like that; and she did not know what to make of it. But at last he stopped and spoke. "You're a clever woman,

Laura, and a handsome one. I've never seen you look so fine as you do to-night. But you are a bit too rapid in some of your movements. You're counting at present that, beyond a doubt, the servants will be calling you 'miladi' within a fortnight, and I suppose you'll go out to-morrow and get a new card-plate engraved. Well, my dear, if I were you, I'd wait. A fortnight is fourteen days, and in every minute of that time something may happen to bring you an appalling disappointment. For instance, I may die. Take it that the Almighty does make me die, and where then comes in the use for your new card-plate? There is precedent for creating a baroness, I grant you; but I don't think they are likely to manufacture another precedent by making you Lady Shelf in your own right if I am not at hand to share the dignity."

A servant came in and announced that Fairfax was in the hall below. Amy Rivers said "Good-night" hurriedly, and slipped out of the room. Mrs. Shelf took up her stand in front of the fireplace, flushed with triumph and wrath, and looking her superbest. "You are talking the merest nonsense, Theodore," she said, "and before that girl, too! Thank goodness, she is practically one of the family, and will not gossip. Die, indeed! You die! what an absurdity! One would think, to hear you, that the world was coming to an end

before the Birthday List is out. Of course you will have the baronetcy. There can't be a doubt about it now, thanks to me."

"What do you want me to say?" Shelf asked.

"Well, to begin with, in common decency you might thank me. If it had not been for my diplomacy in this house to-night, you would only have had a beggarly knighthood offered, if as much as that. You have the chance of making a sensation now."

Shelf stood slowly up, and strode up to the hearth-rug and faced her, with his head thrust forward and his arms folded across his breast. "Yes," he said slowly, "I have a chance of making a sensation—one of the biggest of the century; and mostly owing to your efforts. The Lord grant that the chance slips away from me! You are very beautiful and very clever. But I believe, Laura, that you are the devil, sent expressly on earth to tempt. You'd better go to bed now, and leave me. This is one of the times when I am tempted to kill you."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PLUME-HUNTERS' DINNER-PARTY.

THE one-eyed man, Mr. Billy Nutt, and his friend and partner, whose name was apparently Hank without further attachment, made a livelihood by transgressing the laws of the United States and supplying a strong demand. Ladies of Society wished for egret plumes and other feathers for external adornment, and the Seminole of the Everglades desired corn whisky for his stomach's sake; and whilst Game Regulations forbade collection of the first, Indians' Protection Acts vetoed all distribution of the second. And for the transgressor there were distinct and heavy penalties.

But, to begin with, States law does not carry very far in Florida, which is the home of outlaws; and, in the second place, Mr. Nutt and friend were both "wanted" on several counts already, amongst which unjustifiable homicide ranked high; so that they were men entirely reckless, and inclined to look upon poaching, and illicit whisky peddling to the aboriginal, as the mildest

The Plume-Hunters' Dinner-Party. 199

of mild peccadilloes. Moreover, as in furtherance of their business they were extremely well armed, and apt to shoot first and reflect afterwards when annoyed, they were not persons to be argued with by any of the more gentle methods.

The three men on the steamer were in no way prepared to receive these dubious visitors—were, in fact, completely oblivious of their approach, being still chained in the deadest slumber. The sun had drooped below the tree-tops, and already the night noises of the forest were beginning—the rattle of crickets and toads in the trees, the grunting of the bullfrogs in the swamp, the dry rustle of the jar-flies, and the warm hum of the never-sleeping mosquito. In the darker tree aisles there commenced the fireflies' brief snappings of light; and in the black, shadowed water of the bayous were other phosphorescent glows, like these, only coming from the eyes of some prowling alligator.

The sloop ran down her jib topsail, and as the iron hanks screamed along the stay a negro trotted nimbly out along the flat bowsprit top to secure the sail in its gaskets. The wind was dropping with the sun, and because the current raced manfully down the bight where the stranded steamer was lying, the sloop made but a fathom or so to the good by every board across the river. The one-eyed man danced a barefoot tattoo of fury on

the floorboards of the cockpit at this slowness; and his loose-limbed partner, who still sprawled on the cabin-roof, chuckled with easy amusement. But the breeze held long enough for their purpose. They ran up above the steamer, and the steam ground their planking against the rust-streaked iron. A pair of davit-falls hung down, with the blocks weed-covered in the water; and overhauling one of these, they made it fast round the bitts. Then, swarming up the other fall, the whole five of them gained the bridge-deck above.

Instinctively, when once their feet were on the warm gray planks, each man, black and white, handled his weapon ready to fight or argue as might be demanded of him; but no one appeared to seek explanation of their presence; and from staring about them, they took to staring at one another rather foolishly. If one has been expecting a brisk game of murder, and one meets with empty silence, it rather spoils the sequence of ideas.

"Come to think of it," said Hank in an oppressive whisper, "if there'd been an anchor watch, they'd have hailed us before we got this far. I bet the Old Man's asleep in the chart-house. 'Twouldn't be a bad idea to bottle him."

He pattered across the deck, right hand inside his shirt bosom, pistol gripped in that, and peered in through the open door. The place was ten-

The Plume-Hunters' Dinner-Party. 201

anted by no living thing larger than flies and cockroaches. He drew back half scared by the eeriness of it, and then beckoning his mates, headed them down the companion ladder, treading like a stage conspirator. At the foot, two doors opened, one into the alley-way which was empty, the other into the main cabin, on the floor of which Kettle had been deposited by the donkeyman. But in the culminating spasm of his cramp, the little captain had rolled away out of sight under the table, and so to all appearance this place was deserted also.

The men peered about them, and ran aft, poking their noses in pantry and galley and engine-room. Coming back through the alley-way they searched the two mates' rooms, and found them empty; and going out on the iron fore deck, found the forecastle deserted also. Then they gathered round that gaping rent where the fore-hatch had been, in curious wonder, examining the crumpled plates which were yellow with new rust, and pointing out to one another the twisted stanchions and splintered *débris* below. And at this they were engaged when the sun took its final dive beneath the waters of the Mexican gulf to westward, and the tropical darkness snapped down upon them like the shutting of a box.

"Hank," said the one-eyed man, "this gets me. What in snakes have they been doin' to this

blame' steamboat, and for why have they gug-gug-gone off and left her?"

"Euclid's out of my line," said Hank, oracularly.

"Oh you blank putty-head," retorted his friend, "th-th-ink!"

"You tire me. If they aren't here they aren't. P'r'aps they've gone off and toted the boodle to a *cache*. P'r'aps it's left right here aboard, and if it is I guess we shall find it when we want it. What I'm on for now's grub. I hain't had a Christian meal for three months, thanks to this new sheriff bustling after us, and I'm about sick of mullet and sweet potatoes. But, please our luck, we'll raid their store-rooms here and fix up a regular hotel supper for to-night. That's me. Now, come along, fellers."

The negroes chuckled and crowed, capering like children, and went off with the tall man towards the galley, and Nutt, after an ineffectual attempt to speak (which threw him into a paroxysm of fury), presently followed them.

The feast was *sui generis*. They found grease, baking powder, and flour, and made doughnuts; they hotted three tins of Julienne soup; they baked a great mass of salt pork on a bedding of white beans; they made a stew of preserved potatoes, Australian mutton, and *pâté de foie gras*; and, as a *chef d'œuvre*, one of the negroes

The Plume-Hunters' Dinner-Party. 203

turned out some crisp three-corned tartlets stuffed with strawberry jam. Then Hank, with a lamp in one hand, a cylinder of plates in the other, and a whole armory of knives and forks bristling from his pockets, pattered off to the main cabin to lay the table.

At the doorway he stopped, gaping, and because the instinct of the much-hunted made his right hand slip round to a certain back pocket, the plates went to the ground with a crash. In the swivel-chair at the head of the table was huddled a man, a small man, with a cold cigar bitten tight between his teeth, a man so grimy with coal-dust that Hank couldn't have sworn whether the short, peaked beard which rested on his chest was black or red or prussian-blue.

"Oh, don't you trouble to be polite," said the man in the chair. "I'm mighty glad to see any one who can talk, or use a pair of hands." Here he lifted his nose and sniffed the air like a hound. "Is that supper you're cooking?"

"I reckon."

"Found anything to wash it down with?"

"There was a dozen bottles of beer, but we wanted those between whiles, and I guess they're drunk."

"There should have been more, but I suppose my lousy steward has necked them. However, this is a big night, and this is the first time I've

seen you and your mates, and so I guess champagne'll be good enough for us. There's a case in that end room ready a-purpose for this sort of celebration day. Perhaps you'll fetch it out; I'm weak still."

Hank obeyed, wonderingly, and laid the table, and brought on the viands, in which he was assisted by Nutt and the blacks.

Then Captain Kettle spoke again.

"Oh, look here, friends, I'm not going to sit at table with niggers. I take it this isn't a blessed missionary meeting."

It seemed as though there would be a row. One of the blacks stated his intention of taking no "sass from that po' white trash," and another openly drew a razor, and made suggestive motions with it through the air.

"Of course," said Kettle, "if you two gentlemen have chucked your color, and care to feed with those ornaments, you can do it. Only I'm a white man, and have my pride."

"That's right," said Nutt. "Picnicking on the sloop's different. But this is a regular hotel supper, with napkins and a tablecloth, and I guess anything colored 'ud spoil the tone. Say s-s-s-sonnies, you mosey."

"I done cooked most this yer grub," whined he of the razor, "an' I'se gwine t'eat my belly-load."

The Plume-Hunters' Dinner-Party. 205

"Well, collar what you want to eat till you bu-s-s-s."

"Yes, but whar'll we go?"

Nutt looked at Captain Kettle. The little man in the swivel-chair gave his African guests full leave to go to a place considerably hotter than the engine-hold ; suggesting the mess-room as an afterthought and alternative ; whither they betook themselves, grumbling. And then the three whites commenced their meal.

Kettle unwired a champagne bottle with a fork, and poured out three long tumblers of dancing froth. "Wine!" said Hank. "Oh, my Jemima!"

"Geg-geg-got any ice?" queried the one-eyed man.

"Ice is off," replied the captain. "Things have been that hot this trip it gave up and melted."

"You seem to got your manners on ice, Mr. Billy Nutt," said his friend. "Now I see an elegant hotel meal in front of me, and I'm going to make a pig of myself, and be jolly well thankful. I hain't any use for your high-toned sort of canoosering. See here, stuff your silly mouth, and quit grumbling right now. D'ye hear me?"

His guests ate, and Kettle made small talk for them, at the same time playing a good knife and fork himself. The food seemed to straighten his back and knock the limpness out of him ; but Mr. Nutt and his friend were lapping their cham-

pagne too industriously to see any significance in the change. They were enjoying themselves with a gusto to which the ordinary gourmand is a stranger. Probably there is nothing on earth so nauseating as a severe course of the Floridan sweet potato. And, consequently, there is no diet so calculated to make one appreciate a more generous *menu*.

The meal crept steadily through its courses, and the empty bottles grew on the cabin floor. No one got drunk. Captain Kettle's own libations were sparing, and the others had each a high co-efficient of absorption; still all were exhilarated, and ripe for mischief or merriment as might befall.

"Say, cap," said the long man, as he dallied with his last strawberry tartlet, "isn't it so that you've got this fine steamboat of yours ballasted with sovereigns?"

"It's so," said Kettle, "or something very like that."

"Your own?"

"Oh Lord, no. Just freight consigned to New Orleans, and brought here by that blow-up I was telling you about. I suppose that you gentlemen'll have no objection to bearing a hand aboard o' me now you are here? I'm a bit short-manned, and it 'ud be a pity to let freight like that rust for want of fingering."

The Plume-Hunters' Dinner-Party. 207

Hank grinned at his *vis-à-vis*, and then turned to the little skipper in the swivel-chair. "No," he said, "I don't see there's anything wrong with that. I'm afraid, though, if we chipped in we couldn't sign on so far as Noo Orleans."

"New Orleans be sugared," cried Captain Kettle. "Haven't I spoke plain enough already? Don't you understand all this racket's a blessed swindle? The steamer's going to have the name-plate on her engines altered, and the label on her stern changed, and a different pattern painted on her smoke-stacks, and a coat of gray clapped on her outside. And then, when she's so bedevilled her own builder wouldn't know her, we'll run her round to some South American port where the least number of questions will be asked, and sell her for what she'll fetch. But only the steamer, mark you. I reckon she's carried the freight far enough. That'll be struck out of her here."

"You bet," said Nutt, rubbing his hands. "We'll *corral* the dollars for you right here till you come back. You shall have our niggers to s-s-stoke for you, if you can get 'em, and can manage 'em. But they're fair toughs. Perhaps you'd w-w-weaken when you came to know 'em a bit."

"I'd handle," retorted Kettle, "a crew of old Nick's firemen, raw out of hell, if I was put to it. Don't you make any error. I've kept my end up with the worst crowds a man ever put to sea with."

By James!" he went on, with a blow at the table, "by James! I'd handle you, Mr. Nutt, if you were signed aboard o' me, till you couldn't call your soul your own."

"You'd w-w-which?" snarled Nutt, rising in his chair.

"Sit, you swine," said his partner, "and be quiet. You tire me. What are you riling the gentleman for, just when we were getting so nice and friendly with him?"

"You—lemme alone."

"I'll smash your ugly little face in if you don't keep it shut."

The one-eyed man tried to retort, but his infirmity gagged him, and a spasm of wild fury bit into all his muscles.

His friend wagged a derisive finger. "There's an image for you, cap. Look at the creature, froze like a Chinese potdog; look at him and don't laugh. And, say, just reach me another bottle of wine, it will be so good. Thanks, siree. I wouldn't care if I died drinking this. Here's our blessed health. Good old cap; you stick to me and I'll stick to you; and if Mr. Billy Nutt can't swallow his tantrums and join us two gentlemen like another gentleman, by Jemima, we'll give him what he's got for his share, and set him adrift in an empty bottle. You hear me, Billy Nutt?"

The Plume-Hunters' Dinner-Party. 209

"You spup-luttering fool. You boosey, drunken puttyhead."

"I'm not drunk," retorted Hank, "but I'm merry. Have a sup yourself, and then perhaps you'll be better company." With which advice a liberal heeltap of champagne splashed in Nutt's face.

The man sprang to his feet, glowering like a fiend. What followed was completed before a watch could tick twice. For once the gift of speech did not desert him. The fatal words bounced glibly off his tongue, and Hank's vengeful hands shot out. In an instant the pair were grappling together, and a gouging thumb did its horrid work. Then, tearing himself away, eyeless, the lesser man ran screaming blindly into the sideboard at the other side of the cabin. His friend pitched stiffly forward, and fell face downward amongst the dishes, lying there without so much as a quiver. He was stone dead. With the black-handled knife that had carved their baking of pork, Nutt had stabbed him from the shoulder down through his heart.

"That saves my cartridges," said Captain Kettle, and took his cocked revolver from where it lodged between his knee and the under side of the table.

He passed swiftly out through the pantry door, and was just in time for what he expected. The

negroes, alarmed by Nutt's shrieks, were rushing from the mess-room to see what had gone wrong. He charged and drove them furiously back. They turned and ran before him, tumbling over one another in their scared haste; and then he took up his place in the doorway, threatening them with steady weapon and crisp, decisive tongue.

"Quick," he cried, "quick, you scum; unload yourselves. Pitch overboard your knives and razors and whatever you've got, or, by James, if a man of you stops to think, I'll blow his brains through the porthole."

The negroes obeyed him in sullen, frightened silence, and stood with elbows up facing him as he covered them. Kettle watched the three with steady eye; but his ear was cocked down the passage, drinking in every rustle which came from the place he had left.

The shriekings of the eyeless man in the cabin had given way to groans; and then there came the sound of bumps and scratchings, as though he were blundering madly about to find something; and then the pattering of naked feet as he groped his way up the lead-covered steps of the companion. So intently did they follow this one man's movements that it seemed to them as though all other sounds were hushed, even to the never-ceasing hum of the insects.

The Plume-Hunters' Dinner-Party. 211

With awe the listeners held their breath for what might come next. But they had not long to wait. From the deck above there burst out a wild tirade of hate and blasphemy, which ended in a shrieking cry of despair and a plunging splash; and once more the distant noises of the night closed in upon them.

"Nutt," said Captain Kettle, "is dead, and I'm almost sorry. I believe I could have liked that man. He'd grit in him, had Nutt, and he wouldn't take cheek from a living soul. Your other boss also is dead; killed by Nutt. So you're my niggers now, and will be till I've done with you."

"Whord you mean?" one of the captives asked, with a whine.

"You'll have to do what niggers were sent in the world for, and that's work. Your fool of a government says you aren't slaves now, and so I won't treat you as such. That is, you'll be paid. But I shall get my money's worth out of you first."

"I guess this is a free country. You can't make us work unless we choose."

"I've had that said before to me," Kettle rejoined grimly, "by better men than you—white men—and they changed their minds when I got to handling them. You'll see later. But for now you've got to stay here; and if you get out, and

I find you rambling, you'll be shot like crows. You quite understand?"

He shut the mess-room door and locked it, and once more went to the main cabin. The tall man lay exactly as he had fallen, and from underneath his neck five tricklets of red spread out across the slopped table-cloth, like the fingers of a monstrous hand. The lamplight fell also upon other smearings of red, where Nutt had groped his way round the panelling. Kettle leaned up against the rail of the sideboard and wiped his face with a napkin. Perspiration had loosened the coal dust, and the skin came out white, with only here and there a smudge of the old grime.

"Supposing," he said to himself, "we were nabbed now, and there was a trial, who's to prove I didn't put the pork-knife in that man? Oh dear Lord, what a hat it's getting."

CHAPTER XIX.

SUBJECTS FOR MATRIMONY.

MISS KILDARE gave a shrug to her shoulders. "Yes," she said, "I suppose it is a different me. I've got my hair done up, and longer skirts, and all the rest of it. In fact, like the young person in the book, I've growed. But I don't see that you have altered much, except that you're just a tiny-iny bit crows-footy about the eyes. You haven't even grown a mustache, as I always wanted you to do."

"Didn't know I was going to meet you, or I might have spared my razor."

"I wish you'd known, then. But fancy your turning up here of all places. It is an extremely small world—there's no doubt about that. Well, Pat, as we've each said at least twenty times apiece how surprised we are to see one another, suppose you come out on to the piazza and tell me things. We shall have a crowd round us if we stay here in the hall much longer."

"My dear child, what things?" asked Onslow, laughing. "I've been chattering history to you ever since I turned up at the hotel."

The girl seated herself in a cool, cane rocker, and picked up a palm-leaf fan. "Hundreds of things. To begin with, what are people wearing in Town just now?"

"In London? Oh, frock coats, rather longer than ever, and narrow-stripe trousers, and topplers with just twopennyworth of curl in them—not more."

"But I mean the women?"

"Fifteen yards to the skirt, and they're beginning to drape them. The fashionable deformity at present is elephantiasis of the biceps—I mean gigot sleeves. They start at the ears, and go down to the elbows—some of them further."

"Ah," said Miss Kildare, thoughtfully, "I used to have good arms. Not quite as nice as Mabel's, though. But latterly I haven't been in places where evening dress was used. By the way, do you dance still?"

"Keen on it as ever."

"What's the waltz like now?"

"Capering on hot bricks. Heaps more exercise to the furlong. People kill themselves at it much sooner."

"Reverse?"

"In the north of England, where they all dance well, they're like the Americans, and go each way alternately. In London and the south, where most of them waltz vilely, reversing is Aceldama."

"I suppose," said Miss Kildare, with her eyes meditatively following a bronze-green humming-bird which was darting about a trumpet-vine on the piazza rail, "I suppose we shall have a hop here to-night. I shan't reverse; and when my partners ask why, I shall tell them it's the latest thing. One always likes to be as English as possible. Tell me something else that it's toney to do."

"Read nasty novels, written by women you wouldn't sit in the same room with, and then gush about them afterwards. That's a very fashionable amusement with the up-to-date young women."

"Ugh, Pat, don't be a pig. Besides, that wouldn't suit my style a bit."

"But why want to change, Elsie? Don't you appreciate yourself as you are at present? I'm sure other people would."

"That's blarney."

"No," said Onslow, judicially, "I think it's ordinary fact."

"Is it really, though? I am glad. You know, I've thought lately my present stock-in-trade wouldn't pass muster outside Florida. I can handle a boat in any weather, and ride anything that's called a horse, and can dance decently in American fashion; but I can't do anything else, except perhaps talk, if that counts."

Onslow laughed. "You are refreshing," he said. "But why this inventory of stock?"

"Because, Pat, I'm wondering how I shall get on in England. I'm going out there this fall. I'm two and twenty, you know, and I can do as I like, and living in the back blocks is beginning to pall."

"Going there by yourself?"

"No, I'm not quite so independent as that. The Van Liews, the people I'm staying with here, spend the winter in London, and they're going to take me with them."

"And afterwards, you come back again to the States?"

Miss Kildare again watched the bronze-green humming-bird. "*Quien sabe?*" she said. "I may be induced to stay."

"What! You're going to get married?"

"Why not, if I have an invitation? Twenty-two's getting on."

"Ah," said Onslow, and set to rocking his chair.

"Yes?"

"I didn't say anything."

"You said 'Ah,' Patrick, and that meant you thought a lot besides."

"Quite right, I did. It had never quite struck me till then that you were a completely grown-up young woman now, and might any day see a

man to go into permanent partnership with. It's a bit of a jar—I mean, it comes oddly to one at first to think of you as married, Elsie."

"*Shoo-ssh!* Pat, get up and drive that humming-bird away. He won't go for me, greedy little beast; and if he stays any longer I know he'll over-eat himself. Well, you'd better brace yourself up for a blow, because married I mean to be some day. Who knows but what you'll beat me in the race?"

"I?"

"Why not? When Duvernay died, Mabel became a widow."

"That," said Onslow, "is the usual sequence of events."

"You know she never wanted to marry him."

"So I was led to understand some five years back. Yet marry him she did nevertheless, and that after due publication of banns. I might remark, Elsie, that that humming-bird you were interested in is still gorging himself out of those red flowers just on the other side of you."

"Some creatures never know when to stop. Now I do," said Miss Kildare. "That's the bell for dinner. I must go and tidy myself."

Meanwhile in that same Floridan hotel a certain Mr. Kent-Williams, a young gentleman of England, who was throwing poker dice at the bar with two friends for ante-prandial cock-tails, was look-

ing at the same subject from a different coign of view. He was a young gentleman who had not made a conspicuous success of himself at home, and had been deported to Florida with a view to extracting a fortune from orange growing. As on reaching the spot he found this was difficult of achievement, he wisely did not worry his brain with any vain attempts, but was content with living in inexpensive retirement under a palmetto-shuck for nineteen-twentieths of each quarter, and blossoming out during the remaining days in riotous living at the Point Sebastian hotel on the allowance which reached him from home. And with him were two others who had been softly nurtured, and who were also taking their quarterly nip of semi-civilization.

"I tell you," said Mr. Kent-Williams, "she's a clinking fine specimen, that Kildare girl, and, by Jove, I ought to be a judge if any one is round here. Look! three sevens, first shot: good, I'll keep these, and see if I can rattle out another. She'll go to England and marry a duke as sure as fits, don't you know. I wonder if Onslow will hitch on to the other sister. Looks like it, his coming here after the Duvernay beast turned up his toes. I never could stand Duvernay; not a 'Varsity man, don't you know, and hadn't been anywhere to school. Simply a bit of money, and thought he could swagger on that. By Jove! two bul-

lets. That makes me a Full House, and I'll stand on it. Collar the box, Willie, dear boy, and beat me if you can."

"No," said Willie, scooping the dice into the leather box, and thoughtfully stirring them before he emptied on to the pewter counter. "I don't think—ar—Duvernay was anybody. I did know him here, of course, because one couldn't help it, but I—ar—don't recollect meeting him at the club or anywhere before we—ar—came out. By ged! look there! Fours first shot. Of course, the Kildares are all right as far as family goes, but they're poor as regards the—ar—almighty dollar. If it wasn't for that, by ged! I wouldn't mind going in for the fair Elsie myself. Wobinson, old chappie, take the box and agitate. You won't beat my four ladies."

"I wish," said Kent-Williams, meditatively, "I knew what Onslow was going to do. Mabel Duvernay's a charming woman, and she's got at least £500 a year. I don't want to make a fool of myself if Onslow's still in the running. And, by Jove! I know she's as fond of him as ever. That beast Duvernay used to twit her with it when he was in an extra vile temper."

"Go slow," advised Robinson, "and hang back for bets. Here, I can't improve on two pairs, so you and I throw again. Here's the box. By the way, why not ask Onslow yourself? You knew

him well enough at Cambridge, and you aren't shy."

"I'm not shy, dear boy, and I used to know Patrick Onslow well before I came out. He's a devilish genial fellow, so long as you rub him the right way, but I shouldn't like to cross-question him too much about Mrs. Duvernay. You see, don't you know, he was most infernally struck on the lady before she was married, and he's one of those fellows with a long memory, who don't forget. Now I, dear boy, have been in love with heaps of women in my time, and they with me; but when they gave me the chuck, or I got tired of them, I didn't break my blessed heart, or play the goat, or do anything of that kind. I simply went on to the next caravan, which is a devilish comfortable amusement. But old Pat isn't built that way. He's one of those fools who would get gone on a woman and keep her in mind for years and years afterwards. Mighty dreary sort of game to my way of thinking. By Jove! four kings. If you beat those, dear boy, may I live on sweet potatoes and mullet for all the rest of my natural life."

"Oh, Lord," said Robinson, "£500 a year—twenty-five hundred dollars! One could pig along with that very comfortably in lots of places. What unlucky brutes some of us are. Oh, curse it, just my form; two pairs again. We won't pro-

long the agony. My shout—what'll you fellows have?"

They drank their cocktails, and went into the vast, bare dining-hall, where a shining negro waiter supplied each with a tumbler of iced tea and two dozen oval dishes of comestibles.

"Onslow seems thick enough with the Kildare girl," Kent-Williams observed. "But, of course, he knew her when she was a kid, and they'd have heaps to talk about. What do you think, Willie?"

"How should I know, dear chappie? I'm not one of those thought-reading fellows. But perhaps she's—ar—telling him about her sister. Girls always try and run a fellow for their sisters if they can't get the fellow—ar—for themselves."

"Here, waiter!" shouted Robinson, "what did you bring sweet potatoes for? Nobody ordered them. Take the damned things away and bury them." The waiter grinned and vanished with the dishes, and Robinson set to savagely tearing at a tough beefsteak with a silver-bladed knife. "Money's run out," he grumbled, "and back we go to-morrow to live like wild beasts in a palmetto-shuck, on that accursed food and nothing else. I believe that foul, grinning nigger knew, and brought those sweet spuds here just to insult us. I've a great mind to break his beastly neck."

"What's the use of getting hot over it this weather?" said Kent-Williams. "If you did break the nigger's neck it wouldn't add to your income, and that's the only occupation I know worth living for."

"And, therefore, you want to marry Mrs. Duvernay?"

"Or any one else with a modicum of dollars. I'm not prejudiced. Believe me, dear boy, I could pour out a whole wealth of affection on sweet Mabel or sweet Kitty, or sweet anybody else who was able to support me in moderate comfort. At present my talents are thrown away during nineteen-twentieths of the year, because Nature never intended me to shine as a noble savage. Consequently, dear boy, I'm ready to throw myself away on any one."

"Oh, I like that," said Robinson. "You might have married a girl here last winter."

"The traveling English person without the aitches? Yes, dear boy, I did think about it. But I came to the conclusion that she was too old to reform, and, don't you know, one really couldn't stand living with an aitchless person eternally for any amount of income. Of course, it was a sacrifice, and the poor girl was very let down; but I think she'll get over it in time. They all do."

"Probably she has done," said Robinson,

grimly. "From what he said, her father was quite resigned to your loss before he left here."

"My prospective father-in-law was sordid. He couldn't appreciate a gentleman. Now, Mabel's papa is in a better land, and, by Jove! that's a great point in her favor. I never could stand paternal advice."

"You seem to be making pretty sure of getting the lady."

"I'm not at all sure, but I want to find out how the land lies. And, by Jove! clever thought! I know how to do it. I'll go to Onslow after dinner, tell him I'm going to call on Mrs. Duvernay to-morrow, and offer to take him down there in my dug-out. I shall soon see what his game is. If he's after her still, he'll look jealous, and trust me for seeing it; and if he isn't, why it's a walk-over."

"All the same," remarked his other friend, "I don't think I'd—ar—put very long odds on you, old chappie. There's nothing certain in this life, and widows are apt—ar—to keep a fellow dangling till a fellow gets tired. Finished? Then let's go to the bar and throw for liqueurs. Mine's *crème de menthe*."

CHAPTER XX.

AT POINT SEBASTIAN.

NOW the great rambling, wooden hotel in which Miss Elsie Kildare was staying under care of her friends, the Van Liews, though on the end of a telegraph-wire, and within easy day's steam of a railroad, was not particularly far in crow's-flight from that uncharted river where the *Port Edes* lay stranded on a sand-bar. The hotel, in fact, backed upon the Everglades, and faced the blue, crisping waters of the Mexican Gulf. At one side of it was a plantation of sisal hemp, and beyond that thickets of saw-grass, and beyond again cypress-trees and cabbage-palms sprouting from an undergrowth which was bound into an impenetrable *cheveux de frise* with wait-a-bit thorn. At the other side were newly planted umbrella-trees, two decrepit orange-bushes without fruit, twenty luxuriant chumps of elephants' ears, and then straggles of palmetto-scrub right down to the soft white banks of Gulf sand. Beyond was clear blue water, with a rickety wooden wharf straddling a mile out into it, like some uncouth, gray-

legged centipede. And beneath the water, dented rusty food-cans grew intimate with the coral polyp.

In winter time, Point Sebastian was a resting-place for nabobs of the north, and a congregation spot for those delightful American women who leave a convenient husband at work elsewhere on the dollar-mill. But, in the warmer months, these worthy people did their pleasure-living at the sea beaches of the north, or the hotels of the Alleghanies; and the rest-house at Point Sebastian locked and covered most of its glories. The Floridan who stays in Florida all summer does so usually because of a tightness in the exchequer; and for the few of him who came to dissipate a small but hardly scraped-up hoard in a spell of semi-civilization, a tenth of the available rooms made ample lodging place.

Still there was a summer season of sorts at Point Sebastian, which was merry enough in its way. Most nights, on the parquet of the hall, a cheery score danced under the glare of electric lights to the lilt of Teuton fiddles; and in the cool gloom of the piazzas outside, if straitened means did prevent the actual drafting of marriage contracts, even penury undisguised could enjoy the dallyings of the week's flirtation. Mr. Kent-Williams and his tribe were entertaining fellows enough to meet for a limited time, and maidens,

come into the hotel for an annual outing, basked in the odor of their pretty sayings, and frankly prepared themselves for nothing beyond temporary amusement.

Patrick Onslow met at least five men there he knew, which shows the great advantage of being a University man; because, since at Oxford and Cambridge they most successfully refrain from teaching anything that is of commercial use to any one except a parson or a doctor or a school-master, it naturally follows that many men from those seats of learning fail to make a living at home, and drift across the seas.

He did not make the smallest secret about his advent. As the newspapers had told them already, he had been on the unlucky *Port Edes* when she came to grief, but had managed to get ashore by a marvelous streak of luck, and found himself at a spot where, less than a year ago, he had been wandering about on a shooting expedition. Thence he had made his way in a dug-out, bought from a Seminole, to the hotel on Point Sebastian. *V'la tout*. There was nothing surprising about it. He had had several opportunities for drowning before that, but none of them had ever come off. So he supposed that the *Parcæ* marked him out to live. And—what would they have? His shout.

At that period Mr. Patrick Onslow was feeling

extremely pleased with himself. He hated the work at which he had been engaged, as any man must hate being mixed with a swindle, be it great or small. And the end seemed near—the end, conjoined to full success.

He had had a struggle for it, because once more Captain Kettle had felt inclined to fight for his own hand rather than do all things for mere employers, who only paid him a small salary. It was when Onslow woke from that dead sleep on the wheel grating of the upper bridge, and came down to learn of the tragedy of the plume-hunters which had taken place during his unconsciousness, that he got the first hint of this. The little captain received him with cold stiffness, was wooden when asked for any suggestion, and snarled when Onslow inquired what ailed him. It was the donkeyman who put the difficulty into words.

“And, captain, now,” said he, “how much might yez be getting out of all this for yer-self?”

“£500.”

“Begor it’s a mighty lot of money, and little enough too. I wish I’d it meself, an’ more. I’d like a house ashore, an’ a wife, an’ an ass-cart that I might dhrive her out in like a gentleman, besides other things.”

“Oh, stop that. Don’t tell me what a man

might do if he'd his pick of the money in this ship. I can figure that out for myself without suggestions from any blasted Irishman. Have been doing in fact."

"Ah, now, captain dear, don't be cross wid me, because I was going on to say that in case of trouble—in case there was, we'll say, a thrifling argument, I'd be on your side. Mr. Onslow, you're a gentleman, an' I like ye well, but the captain here's me officer—an'—well, sor, a boy must look after himself sometimes, 'specially when there's a chance like this ready to his fingers. 'Twon't come again in a lifetime."

"Probably not," said Onslow. He lay back in his chair with linked fingers behind his head. "Look here, Kettle, if you want to shoot me, pull out your gun and get it over. Then you and Sullivan can run the cargo where you please, and share it how you like. But that's the only way you'll make me consent to your taking what's beyond your due. Shelf trusted me, and, by Jove, I'm going to act fairly by Shelf if he were a ten times bigger thief than I know him to be already. Now then, jump quick; let's have it over."

They were in the chart-house. Captain Kettle puckered his head for a minute's thought, and then, getting up, shut and locked the starboard door. He took that key, and the key also of the other door, which gave upon the head of

the companion-way, and handed them both to Onslow.

“ Now, sir,” said he, “ you lock me and the donkey-man in here, and go and do as you like. But I advise you to take your infernal gold somewhere out of this ship, because as sure as it’s there when I next come out of this room, so sure do I go and loot it. That’s my bunk there, bang above the place where it’s stowed, and I’ve sat on top of those sovereigns like a hen every watch below I’ve had this voyage, and heard ’em chinkle, and wondered what they’d hatch out into. You perhaps, understand what I mean ? ”

Onslow nodded.

“ Then take the synch from me, sir, and cart your boxes away as quick as you can. Poor men like me shouldn’t have big temptations. It isn’t healthy—for their neighbors. No, by James! Here, get out of this, Mr. Onslow, or I shall be doing you a violence yet ; and mind you lock the door. Donkey-man, you hound, there’s whisky in that bottom locker. Take the clean glass yourself, and give me the dirty one.”

Onslow read the little man’s mind to a comma, and bowed gravely without speaking. Then he did as he was bidden with the door and key, and went below, and began the Herculean task of bringing up the iron-bound specie boxes one by one out of the cabin where they had ridden from

the Mersey dock. He placed them in the port quarter boat, which he had lowered from its davits flush with the bridge deck rail ; and when she was loaded he put the boat into the river. He rowed her far up stream, past bights and bayous, till he found a narrow canal leading off the main river through mangrove clumps, and held on up that till the boat reached a great round vat of black water, walled all around with solemn cypress-trees, and roofed to darkness by their fringing branches.

One by one the boxes were raised on the gunwale and launched with a sullen plunge ; and it seemed an age before the foul-smelling bubbles came up to tell that they had sounded bottom. And then away back for another load. And then for a third. The inky water closed over all, and not so much as a splinter from one of the boxes floated on the surface.

Small fear of any one raiding that *cache*, Onslow thought ; and two days later, with a clear mind, he was cabling “ *Right* ” to Theodore Shelf from the Eastern Union Telegraph Company’s Office in the hotel hall at Point Sebastian.

Now, modern science enables us to cry a message by wire round half the earth at breakfast time, and have an answer returned to us before the gong sounds for luncheon ; and it was in

anticipation of a quick exchange of news like this that Onslow had come to the nearest outpost of civilization.

He had hidden his £500,000 of gold, released the two men in the chart house, with instructions that when they felt inclined (or sufficiently recovered) for work they should, with the negroes' help, set about transforming the steamer's appearance ; and afterwards had made his way, partly overland by an Indian's path he knew of, partly in dug-out through lagoon and bayou, to Point Sebastian. It was an entire surprise to him to meet Miss Kildare there. But this time it was no special shock. That early morning glimpse of her in the schooner had warned him of her neighborhood,

He got a return message to his cable it is true ; but not before noon on the following day. It said "*Take no steps : am writing,*" and seemed to hint at a change of plan.

In another place he might have resented the delay. At least eleven days must pass, and probably more, before a letter could reach him ; and all the while he would be condemned to inaction and anxiety. But, as it was, he read Mr. Theodore Shelf's reply cablegram with a frown, which was quite evanescent, and felt a mild satisfaction in the respite. In the afternoon he took out Miss Kildare to fish for tarpon.

By one of those singular chances which occur every century or so, a tarpon they did actually catch on that first day of fishing, a thirty pound monster, with glittering silver scales on him as big as dollars, who gave three hours' frantic fight before he turned his belly to the skies, and submitted to traveling beachwards in the boat.

"We got him between us," said Miss Kildare. "That's my first, and I've tried for him times out of number."

"My first also, and I've tarpon-fished for weeks."

"We seem to bring one another luck."

"It's an undoubted fact, Elsie, we do."

The deduction seemed to give rise to thoughts in each of them, and they let their eyes rove vaguely over the blue Gulf waters for the next few minutes without speaking, whilst the boat rode gently over the windless swells which slid in through the outlying keys. A porpoise surged past them, coughing as he chased a shoal of mullet; and, overhead, a string of purple and yellow cranes screamed wearily as they flapped home to the Everglades after a day's hard fishing on a growing reef.

"They've all got to make their living," said Onslow.

"Who?" asked the girl.

"I was thinking of those animals in the water and in the air, and, by analogy, the rest of the ani-

mal world. We all of us prey on something else, down to the ass who eats grass; or else we die."

"That's a very sage remark, Pat. Have you been reading Schopenhauer lately, or is your bank account unhealthy?"

Onslow laughed. "Was it pessimistic? I'm not given that way as a general thing. It's so much pleasanter, for one's self and everybody else, to look at matters from the cheerful point of view. But I was thinking at the time that if I'd been well off, and if other things had not happened as they did, my life would have been written very differently."

"You mean you might have been her Majesty's Ambassador to the Court of Timbuctoo?"

"Or something in that line, possibly—yes."

"Mabel," said the girl, "is free now."

Onslow nodded dreamily, and once more let his gaze roam out across the waters. The boat rode uncared for over the gentle oily swells, and the sound of the surf crumbling on the distant keys fell on his ears, and droned to him a lingering tale of might-have-been. Mabel was free! The woman who had once promised to be his wife—the woman whose memory had driven him from pillar to post across the world through all those long, wild years, because his abiding love for her was too great a torment to be borne when he rested for a breathing space in one spot, and had

time for thought. The woman who had, by pressure, been made to marry another man, whom neither on her wedding day nor at any after time did she ever love, was free again. Mabel Duvernay now, and Mabel Kildare no longer ; but Mabel still, and free.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CYCLONE.

A SHINING-FACED negro waiter came up in answer to the bell, and brought tumblers of tinkling ice and water. Both Onslow and Miss Kildare drank thirstily, and then lay back again in their cane chairs, panting. The close heat was something terrible. There was not a breath of either sea breeze or land breeze, and the electric fan which whirred on the table behind them did little more than send a blast of sickly warmth. Down the long line of the piazza were the rest of the people in the hotel, the men cursing and mopping their faces, the women with closed eyes fanning themselves languidly. And, overhead, the shingles of the roof crackled and rustled in the baking air as though they were alive.

Night came, and the bell clashed out its summons to dinner, but no one went in. The wooden sides of the hotel, baked through and through by a month of tropical sun, had made the rooms unendurable. So they stayed where they were, in the hot, oppressive dark, and blinked at the white

summer lightning which splashed the violet heavens in front of them. In heavy panting beats the night seemed to close down upon them and pen them in, so that it was a labor to breathe.

"I can't stand this," said Miss Kildare at last.

"You've got to," replied Onslow, wearily, "unless you choose to go down the beach and sit in the water with your clothes on."

"That would be some relief, although the water is as hot as tea. But I shan't do that. I shall walk out along the pier over the sea. One may faint half way, and tumble over and get drowned ; but anyway that's better than staying here and being cooked slowly."

They got up together, and strolled wearily over the loose white sand, and then more crisply over the worn decking of the pier. Between the lightning flashes, the darkness above them was the darkness of a cave ; but faint, phosphorescent fringes showed out amongst the piles beneath, and these guided them from walking over the edge of the planks.

"You shouldn't stay down here this weather," Onslow said, as they paced down the narrow platform, with fingers intertwined. "You'll lose your color and your beauty if you do, and get thin and sallow like Mrs. Van Liew."

No reply came, and Onslow said nothing more, but walked on thinking.

"You've been here now nine whole days, Pat," the girl said, breaking silence for the second time, when they were half a mile from the shore.

"It can't be. Yes, you're right. Nine days! Time has gone quickly. What have we been doing all the time? Fishing once or twice, and a picnic to that Mound-Builder's place down the canal; and I believe that's all. We've just talked, and sometimes not even talked. You and I, little girl, know one another well enough to be companionable without always chatting. You see, we've always known one another. But still, nine solid days! I'd no idea till you spoke how long it was in actual point of time. It's been very restful."

"You seem to have found it so. You've stayed all the time close about here. Do you know you have not once gone so much as a dozen miles from Point Sebastian."

Mrs. Duvernay's place was fifteen miles away. Onslow saw the point.

"No," he said. "I haven't found time. You and I have had so much to tell one another, Elsie."

"We always have been very good friends," said the girl, and was going to add something else when her words were drowned by a furious crash of thunder.

There had been no working up to it. The summer lightning was noiseless, and there had not

been so much as a mutter of thunder all the day. The great bellow of noise had come in an instant without a rustle of warning.

"That's close overhead," Onslow remarked, "and something else will follow. If it's rain, we shall have a deluge falling in ropes, but I fancy we're in for something different. We had better turn back, Elsie."

"In view of this heat, a wetting would be a distinct luxury; but I think, as you say, there is something else coming besides. Oh, Pat, here it is. Run, or we shall be caught."

The storm gave but one weird moan, a rustle and a shriek from over the treetops, and then was upon them. In a minute it was blowing with a hurricane force which no human being could stand against.

The wind plucked the feet from under them, and they fell to the decking of the pier, gripping with their fingers in the gaps between the planks. A storm of sand and leaves and twigs beat against their heads. The crazy tressle-work of the pier buckled and swung beneath their bodies.

"We must get shorewards," Onslow yelled in his companion's ear; "this jam-crack thing will go by the board directly."

"Right, oh," came back the response cheerily enough, and together they began to warp themselves towards the beach and the wind, plank at

a time. The girl was strong, and accustomed to using her muscles ; but skirts are a poor rig to play caterpillar in, and her progress was slow even with Onslow's help. When they had gained a score of yards, she bade him leave her to make the best of his own way. "I shall get along all right," she cried. "Go and tell them I'm coming."

"Naturally I should," he shouted back with a laugh. "Here, let me link my arm inside yours. That's right. Now we'll ferry along at twice the pace."

But they did not get much further. A minute afterwards, to the kick of a harder squall, the gray old pier tottered and clattered and crunched, and the wind was filled with flying boards, and Onslow found himself with one arm clutching the weed-clad stump of a pile, and the other wrapped round Elsie Kildare.

"Hurt?" he shouted anxiously.

"Not a bit. Sound as a bell. You?"

"All right."

"But where's the water? There should be six feet here, and I can feel none."

"Blown away to sea. We may thank God the wind is not on-shore, or we'd have been drowned, as hundreds of other poor wretches are this moment. Ah! That's a shave."

A lightning flash showed them a huge tree

plucked from its roots, and blowing past them, squirming and crashing about like a live mad thing. Then a heavy squared roof-beam hit their jagged pile, and missed Onslow's arm by a nail's breadth.

"The hotel's going down," he shouted. "The air will be full of this stuff in a minute, and if we try to move we shall be brained before we've got a yard. Crouch down, dear, at the bottom of the post."

"You too?"

"No, there isn't room."

"Then I shall stand."

She dragged at his sleeve and pulled him to her side. "Stay by me here, Pat. You might get swept away, and I couldn't bear that."

"Of course, I'll stay by you, dear. I'll never go till you turn me away." He took new grip with his arms, pinning her between his breast and the weed-ragged leg of the pile. "Elsie, I want to tell you something. You know I've always liked you as a friend; but now it has come to more than that. Much more. Love, darling. Once my mind was full of another woman, and I thought I could never care for any one else as I cared for her. But that was years since—thousands of years it seems now—and, Elsie, I've—I've—forgotten her. She is only a name to me; and your sister. Dear, if we get away from this,

do you think you could like me, too, a little more than an ordinary friend?"

She put her lips to his ear. "Do you think we shall come out of it alive, Pat? Tell me honestly."

"I hope so."

"Honestly, Pat."

"I'm afraid, darling, it's a poor chance."

Her soft, wet cheek nestled against him, and strands of her hair intertwined themselves with his. "Pat," she said, "you never knew, but I loved you all along from the first."

Then, for the first time during many years, Patrick Onslow knew what it was to fear death. Before-time life had held many torments for him, and if lead or water or steel chose to show him the Great Secret, he did not very much care. Now it was all different. He lusted to live with a fierceness which almost drove him mad.

"You are trembling," the girl said anxiously.

"I know I am. You have made me a rank coward, dear."

She understood him, and kissed his mouth; but no other words passed between them.

The cyclone blew on, bellowing and tearing, and the fiends' fingers of the wind did mischief beyond all reckoning. Timber which had stood hundreds of years, ceibas and cypresses, live oaks and pines, sprawled down amongst the

tangled undergrowth, mere masses of splintered matchwood. The mangrove thickets were clogged with stones, with grasses, with gray tangles of Spanish moss. Lakes were licked from their beds and spirted far over the creaming waters of the Gulf. The land birds were driven like helpless spume-flakes far away to sea, and choked with the gale before they were flung breathless from its clutches. The palmetto-shucks of the humbler coast-dwellers vanished in dust. The frame houses of the better-to-do burst at all their angles, and spread like platforms upon the ground.

And meanwhile the great straggling, wooden hotel on Point Sebastian dissolved away like a sandbank in a flooded estuary. First the heat-twisted shingles had been stripped off, flying away into the wind like some strange dark fowl sent as *avant-couriers* of more fearsome things to come. Then weather-boards followed, singly and in coveys; then gable-ends and joists and rafters; all floating and pitching in the air as though the wind had the density of a tossing ocean stream. Chairs and wooden bedsteads, clothes blown out into grotesque shapes, as though the freakish spirits of the storm had donned them, the scantling of the long piazzas, and still more boards, whirled out into the night and vanished for ever down the track of the cyclone. And in the thick

of this devil's bombardment crouched men and women, and other things, shapeless and horrible, which had been men and women once. The tale of the dead grew with awful pace that night.

Once there was a slight lull in the blast of the gale, and the driven-out waters of the shore began to return, and swirled knee-high about the two who were taking refuge at the foot of the pile.

"Come," said Onslow, taking the girl by the hand, "we must run for it." And he led the way beachwards, blundering through piled up mounds of wreckage, whilst the stinging spindrift swirled around their heads and bit them upon the face like whips. But a flying missile from out of the inky blackness struck him on the curve of the temple before he had gone with her twenty yards, and the grip of his fingers loosened, and he swayed and fell without a word. The girl threw herself on his body, wailing that he was killed and that she too would stay there and die; but a wild hope seized her that he might be only stunned, and she took his body in her arms, and half dragging, half carrying, began to go with him once more by tedious inches towards the beach.

Then the cyclone burst out afresh with all the torrent of its fury, and to move or even stand against the wind was a thing impossible. The girl and her burden were flung heavily to the

ground, and a mass of driving wreckage slid above them and pressed them down. "Oh, Pat, Pat," she cried, "I did so want to live with you, and now we must both die here."

Three terrible hours more they spent there, the girl expecting violent death to fall on her every next second, the man in her arms gradually returning to consciousness. And then, like an organ whose wind-chamber has emptied itself, the cyclone suddenly dropped its voice. It had arisen in a minute to the full of its strength, and in a single minute it lulled to a breathless calm, leaving the air scoured and sweet, and the land a tangled desert. The sea alone remembered its lashing actively, and fumed in a swell of sullen majesty in its deeper parts, and sent its angry waters back in rippling surf on to those shallow western beaches from which it had been so ruthlessly evicted.

It was from this last returning tidal wave that the final danger came, but the two under that pile of wreckage managed to slip from beneath the wood when the waters loosened it, and run in the breaking dawn to the higher ground beyond. They were bruised, both of them, and Onslow was bleeding from a jagged cut on the head; but after all, their hurts were trifling compared with what they might have been. Three thousand people died in that night's work amongst the

Southern States ; and the air was torn with the moan of those who were left, lamenting as they sought their dead.

That day all who could lift a pair of hands had work to do, and the next, and the next ; but on the fourth day from the cyclone, when the fallen had been buried and the quick housed, Onslow managed for the first time to get a word *en tête à tête* with this woman who had said she loved him and had promised to be his wife. He had conned the matter over in his mind, and after heavy argument had decided not to hold any of his affairs secret from her ; this of course having particular reference to the one affair by which he hoped to make a competence. He had visions of difficulties with her over it, but he began his confidence artfully.

"Elsie," he said, "I came here to Florida on business."

"Then," replied Miss Kildare, "I'd like to give business a knob of sugar to eat and flowers to wear on his headstall. What color was business? White?"

"Black, distinctly black, but valuable. In figures, slightly more than a quarter of a million in English money ought to come to me for my share out of him ; or rather, as it now is, our share ; yours and mine, dear."

"Oh, you duck, Pat ! You don't mean to say

I'm to marry a rich man? Wherever did you steal the money from? Speculation?"

"Speculation of sorts, though steal describes it better. It's there, and that's the main thing."

"Money in the pocket is better than ten plans to get it there any day. Pat, we'll have a big steam yacht, and when we get sick of London we'll go and see all the rest of the world. But you of all people to become a successful speculator! Tell me, what have you been making your corner in? Nothing unclean I hope, like short ribs of pork?"

"Gold, if that will suit your ladyship."

"Oh, this is delightful. You've been trading on American necessities. Tell me all about it. I think I can follow. One hears so much about the silver question, that one can't help understanding it a little."

So, with a pardonable *couleur de rose*, wherever tinting was available, Onslow told the story of his finding the channel into the Everglades, his compact with Shelf, the hazardous voyage of the s. s. *Port Edes*, and the subsequent disposal of the specie. The girl listened to the tale with close attention and unmoved face. Even the account of the mutiny and the gruesome encounter between Nutt and his friend failed to call up comment, because in domestic Florida a little dashing homicide is such a very common occurrence.

But when Patrick Onslow had finished his say and looked to her for approval, he only got a grave and decisive shake of the auburn head.

"Well, dear," he asked at last, made very anxious by her silence.

"No, Pat," she said quietly, "I can't share in a fortune which has been laid up that way. Heaven knows, I'm not squeamish. Hearing what I do out here about Trusts and Corners and Syndicates, and seeing what I can't help seeing of the way the people around make their living, and still evade the law and retain respect, my notions of morality are very easy and slack. But——"

"But I have gone too far?"

She bowed her face gravely.

"And so," he said bitterly, "after all that I have gone through, and all I've done, you want me to give this fortune up. My God, Elsie, you know what a hateful thing poverty is as well as I do. Think what this money would buy. Love for one another we have already, and we can get besides every pleasure the heart can wish for. I know as well as you do that it was dirtily earned, and I hated the work of getting it, and I'll never dabble in anything so foul again. My instincts bid me live as an upright gentleman, and with the proper income I could do that, and forget I was ever anything else. When I cease to be poor, I cease to be in the way of temptation. Don't you

see? And, besides, there is no chance of being found out. The money is supposed to be blotted out of existence, and it's there now in the 'Glades as a private mine to dig at as we choose. Besides, I'm bound in honor to go on after getting thus far. It isn't as if I were working for my own hand alone. Shelf's my partner, and I can't neglect Shelf's interests for a sentiment."

"Mr. Shelf may do as he chooses, Pat; you yourself may do as you choose, dear; but I can't alter what I've said. I love money, Heaven knows, but I couldn't use money of that sort. You might forget how it came: I couldn't. I can't forget some things. I've a terrible memory when I don't want it to act. I tried to forget you, Pat, ever since you left us in England till the day I saw you here, but I couldn't. I used to pray for forgetfulness all those years, and it wouldn't come; and if I were to marry you now, dear, with that money, I should always remember, just in the same way."

"What is the use of carrying thumbscrews in your pocket?" he asked half angrily.

She smiled a little pained smile. "Can't help it, Pat. I suppose it's the way I'm built. But I'm only telling you facts."

"I thought," he said brusquely, "you wanted to go back into society, and have a steam yacht and do things comfortably. Now, without this

quarter of a million which is lying ready to be picked up, you have two hundred a year, and I have three, which make five hundred pounds in all. I might point out to you that one can't do much continuous splashing amongst smart people on that, in London or anywhere else. Unless, of course, you married some one else."

She flushed painfully. "Oh, Pat," she said, "I don't think I deserved that from you."

He dropped his arms round her and drew her to him tenderly. "No, dear, you didn't. I was a brute. But it's hard for a man to speak soberly when he's just had all his plans smashed to the smallest kind of fragments, and stamped upon by the only person in the world whose opinion he cares a rap about. Of course I know all this business was a theft, a piece of piracy pure and simple. But circumstances elbowed one into it, and I bowed my head to them. Circumstances—you, that is, and you entirely—now drag me out of it, and I'm going to bow again, and say 'Kismet.' Only I wonder what will become of the money. I swear Shelf shan't have the whole half million and the steamer too. But I don't see how we are to give my share back to the rightful owners. One can't very well draw a cheque on the Everglades, and send it to them anonymously by post."

CHAPTER XXII.

MR. SHELF'S LITTLE SURPRISE.

MR. THEODORE SHELF had reached the end of his tether, and, like a shrewd business man, he knew it. There is a certain mad excitement in standing on a high ledge of an iceberg when the steps which you have clambered up by have splintered away, and the hundred-foot cliffs above are threatening every instant to descend in crashing avalanche. You know you have to jump into the cold green waters below, or be crushed out of existence ; and lingering to the very last second is not without its fierce pleasures. The dive is chilly ; the waters beneath unknown ; final escape most hazardous. But it is not these things which make you loiter ; it is the nearness of the crash behind ; and that is fascinating beyond all words.

Mr. Shelf was in a similar position. He knew that his commercial ledge was growing more and more dangerous every minute, by reason of the Law of the Land which loomed above, and yet for the life of him he could not tear himself away.

He had waiting for him that snug *estancia* on the banks of the Rio Paraguay which he had time-before made ready against a possible cataclysm ; but it was left to wait. The excitement of lingering on in London was meat and drink to him. His daring would be spoken about afterwards ; and though, it is true, he might not be blessed, still he would not be forgotten.

That last was, perhaps, the chief reason which made him stay on. The vanity of the man was colossal. He had been tickled by the improving young men, he had been tickled in his tabernacle, he had been tickled by a parliamentary constituency ; but these did not glut him. He wanted more, far more ; and if he could not distinguish himself in the way his wife had hoped, he would at last be famous in his fall. If only he could have stayed on three days more and seen his baronetcy gazetted in the birthday list, he could then have made the most sensational exit on record. But even debarred of this—for he could not avert the crash by even those three short days—he did not intend to depart without his special ruffle of Society drums.

He had a scheme, too, in his waiting, of taking a vengeance on this same wife who had made it necessary for him to fall at all. Without her wild extravagance he would have been able to weather the commercial depression which had weighed

him down ; but she had scoffed at warnings, and increased the muster-roll of her guests, and fed them on bank-notes. What this scheme was he confided to no one but George, and George did not split. George hated Mrs. Shelf to the extent of showing ivory whenever she was near him.

“George,” said Mr. Shelf, at the conclusion of one of these grim confidences, “I shall be a lonely man. You must come out there with me.”

And George poked a cold black nose into Mr. Shelf’s hand, and said that he should be vastly disappointed if he was left behind.

Now Mr. Theodore Shelf intended to have his vengeance on the night of a ball which his wife was going to give, and which for sheer gorgeousness and distinguished assembly was to rival by far all her previous efforts ; and he was quite satisfied in his own mind that the action would be entirely justifiable. Still he was a man not without natural affections. He was extremely fond of his ward, Amy Rivers, even though, through the hard commercial shrewdness of Hamilton Fairfax, he had been obliged to refund her fortune which he had laid hands upon, and so bring nearer the day of his own ruin. Many men would have visited their natural annoyance on the girl, but Shelf did not. Indeed, he was only known to be disagreeable to her once, and that once was the last time he and she had speech together ; and

what he said then was entirely to her interest and without any profit to himself. It was on the morning of the great ball, and he called her to him in his room, and asked if Fairfax would be there that evening.

"Of course," she said. "Why?"

"After what has passed between us?"

"You mean in the City?"

"I do, my dear. Mr. Fairfax has displeased me much. First of all, he resigned from the directorate of my new company, the 'Brothers Steamship Association,' on which I had placed him, a very flattering position for so young a man; and then he caused me deep sorrow in doubting the pureness of my motives in floating the company at all. I am long-suffering, Amy, and because it is my duty to bear with the hasty, I do so as much as possible. But Mr. Fairfax overstepped the mark. Such a spirit as his would cause dissension amongst our simple-minded workers, and I felt it due to them that he should no longer be at their side."

"So you gave him the—well, the sack. Of course, I know."

"Perhaps," said Mr. Shelf, with a smile of pain, "he will be able to obtain employment elsewhere, or, being a young man of means, he may choose to set up in business for himself; but I fear, my dear, that he will miss many of the Christian in-

fluences which so elevate and purify the dependents of Marmaduke Rivers and Shelf."

Miss Rivers shrugged her shoulders. "Isn't this," she said, "to do with the City and not Park Lane? As Mrs. Shelf says, we're ordinary society heathens when we're here, and as she sent Hamilton his card, I don't see that it matters. It's Mrs. Shelf's 'At Home.' "

"And not mine, Amy? You are right in the word, my dear, but not in the spirit. As a Christian, of course I have already forgiven the wrong Mr. Fairfax has done me in doubting the pureness of my motives. But this humble roof is mine, Amy, and it would grieve me to receive under it any one with whom I am not on terms of brotherly amity. But perhaps you can assure me, my dear, that Mr. Fairfax has already repented him of his hasty and unjust words."

"No, that," said Miss Rivers, "I'm sure he hasn't."

"Then," replied Mr. Theodore Shelf, with a sorrowful firmness, "I cannot receive him. I couldn't do it."

"I suppose you know," the girl retorted sharply, "that if Hamilton does not come here to-night, I shan't either."

"You are my ward."

"I may be. But you've never tyrannized over me, and you are not going to begin now. I tell

you flatly that if it's no Hamilton, it's going to be no me. I shall go to Hampstead to stay with my cousin."

"I cannot give way in this, Amy. My conscience will not permit me."

"Very well. May I have the carriage, or must I order a hansom?"

"My dear child, I can refuse you nothing in reason. The brougham is now, as it always has been, entirely at your disposal."

Miss Rivers left the room, and Mr. Shelf scrubbed his dog's ragged head. "She's angry with me now, George," he said, with a fat, satisfied smile, "but I think she'll change her mind afterwards. She's a clever girl, and she'll see. So will that young beggar Fairfax, confound him!"

Then Mr. Shelf put George on a comfortable chair, and turned to his table. He had, as may be imagined, a good deal of writing to get through, and a considerable deal of burning; and the work took him till very late. Then he dressed, slipped out for dinner, and returned by eleven o'clock, to stand behind his wife, and watch her as she received her guests, and share with her the warm congratulations on their coming accession to title. He thought he had never seen the woman look so handsome or so queenly, and once or twice he half regretted the blow which he was going to bring down upon her. But then his eyes would

fall on the walls of the room, and the silver lamps, and the flowers; and the items of that gorgeous display would go into his soul, and wither up any morsel of compassion which might have been there.

"A man's impelling motive is not always under his own hat," he overheard some one saying as they passed him, and he applied the words to himself; and when he remembered the ruthless extravagance which no words or entreaties of his own could stay, and which alone (so he believed) had forced him into knavery, he felt that social death was a poor requital to the woman who had worked his ruin. A knife was more her due. And yet, and yet, she was such a monstrous fine woman, and so thoroughly clever in the *rôle* she had set herself to play.

It certainly was a gorgeous assembly. Not made up exclusively of the very best people perhaps, though many of them were there; but it looked wealth unspeakable. Men in evening dress cannot show this; if they fail to appear like waiters, that is the utmost they can expect. But the women! They carried it on their shoulders and backs, as they have done since the beginning of time. Their dresses were a dream of cost and loveliness, their jewelery a chain of rainbows.

"Oh, Lord," said one young man with preda-

tory instincts, who propped a wall, "why aren't I a practising bushranger just now? There's some of the finest diamonds in all the world here to-night, and two Johnnies with pistols could stick up the whole house. Why's England such a beastly safe place? If there was a hard, wooden chair anywhere here to sit on and think, I believe I'd turn anarchist on the spot."

"Don't reduce the crowd to L. S. D.," said a fellow prop. "It spoils the poetry of the thing. Now, I find them good enough to look at."

"Never said they weren't," rejoined the other. "Only thing is they aren't mine. Now, I could do very well with the lot of them."

"This isn't Turkey," said his friend, reprov-
ingly.

"Oh, not the women. I've got one wife, and she's enough for me. But I'd like the dresses and the diamonds. I'd sell 'em second-hand to the Jews, and riot on the proceeds. Talking of sales, come and find some burgundy cup."

They went away from the ballroom, passing down the broad, shallow stairway, and were going to cross the hall, when a man stopped them and told them the way was closed.

"What's the matter? Has there been an accident?"

"Well, perhaps it might be an accident, sir. 'Tisn't for me to say."

"Who the devil are you, anyway?"

"A member of the metropolitan police force, sir; a plain-clothes man, at your service. Stand back, sir, I say. You can't come down here. The police are searching the lower part of the house."

"My aunt! Has there been a burglary?"

"They are looking for Mr. Shelf," said the policeman, shortly. "There's a warrant out against him for embezzlement. But that needn't affect you gentlemen and ladies up-stairs. You can go on with your dancing."

The two guests looked at one another, and broke into a strained laugh. Then they calmed their faces again, and went back up the stair.

"And I was envying that man a minute ago," said one of them. "Well, 'all flesh is but grass,' as the poor beggar would say himself. Shows how little you can gauge a man's finances from seeing what he spends. I say, bet you a fiver my wife goes to the trial. She knows a judge."

The music stopped at the end of a polka, and the gabble of talk burst promptly out with a clatter, and was carried about all over the house. But by degrees it hushed, and in its place grew the rustle of whispers. The scandal microbe travels quicker than his cousin of cholera. Curious glances were cast over the banisters by men and women, who half hoped, half feared to see their host led away in custody.

Some were sorry ; some were shocked ; a few were grimly glad. The band broke out into "El Dorado ;" and, being the best band in London, it played it so that the very chairs tried to jig about and dance of their own accord. But no leather sole kissed the glistening parquet of the ballroom. The only things that moved there were the music-players, and a tatter of tulle which whirled about to the gale of the cornet. The guests in that house were running from it as though the black plague had broken out. The police had withdrawn their cordon from the bottom of the staircase, and were leaving the spot, as the careful Mr. Shelf had done some short time earlier.

Mrs. Theodore Shelf stood like a woman mazed. She could not change color, for happily that was fixed, according to the canons of the day ; but she posed herself erectly behind a chair in the drawing-room, and gripped with her gloved hands upon the back, till muscles arose in her plump white arms which had never shown there before. Through the doorless doorway she saw an unbroken stream of her guests, cloaked and shawled, making their way to the head of the stair. Most kept their looks studiously before them ; and of the few who cast her a glance, half-scared, half-curious, few added the smallest ghost of a bow.

Of all that wondrous crowd, no women at all, and two men only, came up to her before they went. One said, "Good night, Mrs. Shelf." The other said, "Good night, Laura; I'm very sorry."

Then these followed the rest; and, when all had gone, a white-faced servant came up and told her what had happened. The police had been quick with their search, but the man they wanted had been quicker. He had left the house ten minutes before they arrived.

"Is that all?"

"That is all, madame."

"Very well," said Mrs. Shelf. "I shall not want you any more to-night. Lock up, and then you may all go to bed."

Then, picking up her fan, she walked leisurely out of the drawing-room, and went to her own boudoir.

That Mr. Theodore Shelf had made his own exit and brought about his wife's social downfall most dramatically, even the worst-hit of his victims could not but admit. The police, with exquisite trouble, had traced him to Paddington Station, and found that he had taken a first-class ticket to Liverpool; and, after using the wires, they returned to bed with the firm conviction that their seaport associates would meet the gentleman at Lime Street. Of course they

could not possibly guess that he and a wire-haired fox-terrier dog had changed their route to Monmouthshire, and had arrived in Newport in ample time to go on board one of the Oceanic Steam Transport Company's boats, which had just finished coaling there.

The police and the victims said a good many things when they learnt the simple means by which Mr. Shelf had escaped, and they confidently expected never to see him again in this world, and hoped to miss him in the next.

Of all creation, the newspaper proprietors alone blessed the man, in that he had sent up their circulation with a bounce and a bound. But even they did not show due gratitude. They dissected his doings with all the cruelty that ink is capable of, and made derisive comments on his Christian name. They found no excuse for him; no tittle of good in all his prodigious enterprises. They painted him black all over, inside and out, and Great Britain set back its shoulders and howled with upright wrath over the picture. They published chartered accountants' certificates of their sales, and sold their journals to companies on the strength of the figures, and thanked Heaven in print that they had never gone so low as to receive benefit from Theodore Shelf. It was only in private that they rubbed their hands complacently, and spoke

of him as a journalist's gold-mine. Perhaps this may not strike one as entirely fair; but it was eminently business-like; and, as a commercial man himself, Mr. Shelf should have been the last to condemn it. He did though, for all that. Indeed, circumstances combined to modify his views on many matters after his exit from polite society.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DECISIONS.

WHEN Onslow arrived back at the *Port Edes* from Point Sebastian he found Captain Kettle sitting in the chart-house, with a pen gripped between his teeth and a rhyming dictionary in his hands surrendering its reluctant treasures. On the mahogany desk in front of him was a sheet of much-corrected manuscript, with a capital letter at the commencement of every line; and beyond, in a jam-pot, was a bunch of waxen-leaved magnolia flowers, with two coral-pink magnolia cones, set around with a frill of sheeny leaves.

Captain Owen Kettle was composing a sonnet on the magnolia, and dogged work was trying to finish what a one-line inspiration had begun. The two gaunt mosquitoes, who had slipped into the room when the wire-gauze door was shut, grew visibly fatter without danger to life or wing. In his fine creative frenzy Captain Kettle never felt their touch.

“Hallo, Kettle! Got back at last, you see, and a horrible time I’ve had of it.”

"Than Popish saint more holier," wrote the little man, reading the words as they sprawled across the paper. "And now I want to get in something about the smell. 'Angel-breathed' is the thing, only it don't seem to lay up handily with the rest. Angels are certain to have good breath, and these flowers smell as nutty as anything I've tried. Just take a niff at them yourself. Well, Mr. Onslow, here you are again, and I haven't said I'm glad to see you. But I am. It's as good as meat to me to put eyes on you and hear what's to be doing next. I tell you, it's been pretty dull work with the donkeyman off all day bird-shooting, and me as ship's husband sitting here on my own tail. I fancy you'd be a bit astonished at walking on board here same as you would into a house without having to hail a boat."

"A little; not much. I was prepared for anything after what I saw between Point Sebastian and this."

"I fancy they'll have to bring out new geography books about this part of Florida. I never saw such a place. Why, sir, the blessed ground fairly got up and walked during that blow. I don't think the steamer shifted much; canted a bit to leeward maybe, but didn't budge out of her keel-groove; but it was the shores that fetched weigh. When once they broke moor-

ings, the trees set back their shoulders and sheeted home, and great islands bore down on us like ships. The lightning burnt flares all the time, and I watched through the chart-house ports because no one could stand on deck outside. I'm not a frightened man, Mr. Onslow, or a superstitious, but I thought that night was too hard for a cyclone. I tell you, sir, and you may laugh if you like, I reckoned it up that Judgment Day had come, and I got the Prayer-book and read myself the Burial Service clean through, sea bits and all, so as to fetch whatever happened, land or water. I haven't led a bad life, Mr. Onslow; pretty religious ashore, and never sparing myself trouble, in hazing a crew so as to carry out owner's business at sea; and when I'd said that Burial Service, I felt I'd done all that could be expected. There was only one thing," the little man added plaintively. "I wished I'd a new-washed jacket aboard. The one I'd on was that smeared and crumpled I should have felt shame to appear in it."

"Well, I'm glad you weren't hurt," said Onslow. "It was a terrible night for any one in this area."

"I came through it, Mr. Onslow, without so much as a finger-nail broken. So did the donkey-man. He came up here and asked if I wanted him when the blow began, and when I told him

‘No’ he went to his own room and turned in and slept till it was over. But the niggers didn’t. When the steamer began to list they got scared ; thought she’d turn bilge uppermost, I suppose ; and bolted down to their fishbox of a sloop which lay alongside. Of course, when the shores slipped their moorings and bore down on her, the sloop had to give ; and she and the niggers are buried somewhere yonder to starboard, but where I don’t know. I’ve looked, but there isn’t so much as a spar, there isn’t so much as a whiff of circus to put a label on the spot. I’ve had mighty little to do latterly, and I might have struck up some sort of a sign-board to ‘em, niggers though they were, if I could have fixed the place to an acre ; but when a grave-head gets bigger than that you may be writing ‘here lyeth’ in more senses than one. So I left them quiet. Of course, with the steamer high and dry up-country, and the river two miles away through the thick woods, it wasn’t much good our messing with paint-pots and changing name-plates. We’d built a new fore-hatch and shipped it, and greased up the engines ; and, as that seemed to me all that was necessary, I’ve given my shipmate holiday ever since. There’s the making of a sportsman in our donkeyman, Mr. Onslow. There isn’t a thing that crawls or flies or swims in this section of Florida that blessed Irishman hasn’t blown off

my old gas-pipe at or tried to catch with a worm on a cod-hook. He wasn't keen at first; said he'd been brought up in a works; but when I told him everything he took was poached, by James, sir, you might think he was Prince of Wales, the way he sticks at it."

"Blood will out!" said Onslow, with a laugh, and he marveled at the extraordinary toughness of the donkeyman. At all times there is much sulphur in the water of these Floridan swamps; but since the cyclone the sulphurous emanations had been stirred and set free, till the presence of them was almost unendurable. The waters were black to look upon, yellow to look through: and in the air was a never-failing, never-varying hint at the odor of ancient eggs. It even stole into the chart-house, and mingled with the scent of the magnolia blossoms.

"It isn't violets," the captain assented, in reply to Onslow's comment, "and there's fever knocking about in those swamps as sure as there is in a Hamburg drain. But what's fever mean, sir, except carelessness and ignorance? You tackle fever with science, Mr. Onslow, and it hasn't a show. And if we haven't got science aboard here, concentrated and labelled and bottled down in our medicine-chest, I don't know where you will find it. Yes, sir, I will say that—the *Port Edes* has a romping fine medicine-chest; and I've been

through it all myself, so I ought to know. The donkeyman's been most ways through it, too; but he's on at fever mixtures now, and he's going solid at them. We've three quart bottles: A for bilious, B for malarial, and C for typhoid; and the donkeyman has a swig out of each, with a nip of chlorodyne thrown in, just after his breakfast every morning, and then a rub with some Rheumatic Cure, and if he isn't as right as a mail-boat—well, never speak to me of drugs again. But it's making a tough man of him, Mr. Onslow, and that's what I want, because the donkeyman and I are going to chip in partnership."

"What! buy a steamer together and take her tramping? Well, I hope you'll have all manner of luck."

"Oh, don't you make any error," retorted the captain. "It isn't salt-water trading we're in for. We aren't such gulls as that. We know too much about it, both of us. We're going to start in farming."

"Farming? What do either of you know about that?"

"Oh, don't you take me for a fool, sir. I can learn as well as any one; and so can the donkeyman. We shall get three hundred acres of land granted to the pair of us for nothing in North-West Canada, and even if crops failed altogether, we've enough saved up to live on for the first

two years. We can try it, anyhow, when you give us our discharge from here. Ever since I worked at sea," he added plaintively, "I've always wished to be a farmer."

"I think," said Onslow, "I would dissuade you from the attempt if I could; but I know it's no use trying, so I will hold my tongue on that point. As to when your bargain is up with the *Port Edes*, you can put that at half an hour from now if you like. Anyway, I'm going to leave her directly, and I never intend to return here again."

Captain Kettle's jaw dropped. "What?" he gasped.

"I have changed my mind," Onslow said, "or had it changed for me. For my part, that gold will remain where it is. I am not going to touch a sovereign of it."

"Look here," said Captain Kettle, "do you mind telling me? Did you come against some preacher during the cyclone, and get religion from him?"

"I think I know what you mean. But you're on the wrong track. I'm not the sort who announces publicly that he will cease to be a sinner just because he finds himself in physical danger."

"No," said Kettle; "come to think of it, I should have known you were not. I was a fool to ask that question. But it settles it in another direction. There's a woman got hold of you."

"Or I of her."

"Either way. So that's it? And you told her all about this racket, because you thought it wrong to hold any secrets of your own, and she soured on it. Well, that's woman's way. And the other lady you spoke about, she who made you run wild, you've forgotten her?"

Onslow nodded.

"And she's forgotten you?"

"I hope she has; and if she hasn't I can't help it."

"Well, Mr. Onslow, if this business is to end in a 'bout ship, as soon as the donkeyman comes back from his hunting I am ready to get under weigh and be off. But as he isn't here yet, and as we've still a bit of time to wait, I'd like to hear what is going to become of that £500,000 and the old ship after all. I've been in at the handling of them both so long that I'm beginning to take quite a friendly interest in their movements. As you know, I've liked them so well at times that I've been half inclined to adopt them myself."

"I know; and it is to your honor that you didn't."

"Oh, as to honor, don't you make any blessed error about that, sir. I'm a poor man with a family, and a wife that works, Mr. Onslow, and honor's a luxury beyond my means. It was just my cantankerousness that prevented me

being a rich man this minute. If the crew hadn't been so uppish that night in the gut of the Florida channel, so help me, neither steamer nor gold would have got as far as this. And if it had come to a scramble, then you can bet I'm the man to have grabbed the pig's share. But that chance is gone and done with, and so we'll let it pass for the present. Still, I'd like to hear—if I might—who is to finger the stuff."

"Kettle, I'd tell you if I could, but on my soul, I'm not able. My bargain with the girl I'm going to marry was to pocket no share of the plunder myself; but, as I warned her when we made our bargain, I was Shelf's man still, and couldn't cease to serve him because of scruples with my own conscience. And so I was going to set off and carry his half to the bank which we had agreed upon, when a newspaper arrived to say that he had gone smash, and was in jail awaiting trial on sixteen heavy charges. It seems he had tried to make a bolt of it, and very nearly succeeded; but, through an accident to one of his own steamers, drifted back into the very hands of the English police."

"Having got him," said Kettle, "they are likely to keep him on hand. There should be charges enough against that gentleman, if only they can find half of them, to do anything to him short of hanging."

"Quite so," Onslow agreed. "And I dare say we shall learn the details about that later. But to come back to the piece of knavery we were interested in, I may say that Shelf seems to have been prepared for the smash. Three days ago I had a letter from him (which had been passed on the road by the newspaper cablegram) telling me to transmit the stuff to a place in South America, where he would meet it. The money would have been a pleasant little nest-egg for him to begin life again on somewhere beyond the allurements of extradition treaties; and I've no doubt that if he had got it he would have sailed ahead brilliantly. But he hasn't, and he's in jail; and he will be set up on high as a warning to the universe. There are a good many of us thieves, Kettle; and he was the cleverest of the lot; and he has made a mess of it. Mr. Theodore Shelf will be a wonderful reforming influence in his fall. He'll do more good to the morality of the world by coming a cropper than he ever did by preaching. However, he clearly couldn't handle the money if I did send it to South America now, and, being a convict, he can't hold property; and so (perhaps jesuitically) I hold myself clear of all pledge to him; and that's how the matter stands."

Captain Kettle pulled at his short, red beard. "Then if you two aren't taking any, who on earth is to get this money? Hang me if I can see!"

"The proper owners, whoever they may be," replied Onslow. "But they'll have to be found, and at present I haven't the vaguest notion as to who they are. In fact, as we now stand, there's our half-million of English sovereigns and a romping fine steamer going a-begging."

"Oh, Lord!" mused Kettle, with his eyes upon the jam-pot of magnolia blossom, "why can't this boodle be grabbed by a man like me? What have I done that I should kick up and down the world, and earn my living by being ugly to crews? If I'd means there wouldn't be a wholesomer man between here and heaven. I'd have that farm, with cows on it, and sheep, and a steam threshing-machine, and I'd ride about the fields on a horse, and boss the hands just like Abraham did. I'd have the farm-buildings all painted white, with red roofs; and the house should be painted stone-color, with green shutters, and red flower-pots in the windows. No more lodging-house-keeping for the missis in Llandudno. I'd just waltz in there and turn the brutes she'd been slaving for right out into the street, and then take her off to my new farm before she'd time to gasp. We'd have a girl to do the house-work, and my old woman should be a lady, with nothing to do but trot round after her and see she did it. The kids—well, I guess I'd send them off to first-class boarding-schools first, and pay forty pounds each

for them every year so long as there was anything more for them to learn. But they should come to us for the holidays ; and in the evenings they and the missis should sing hymns, and I'd play the tunes for them on the accordion. I'd teach them to hold up their heads amongst the neighbors. And on Sunday nights we'd have in the minister to supper, and fill him out. Yes, Mr. Onslow, that's the kind of man I am. Let me bend yellow gaiters and shave my chin, and there wouldn't be a better, more God-fearing, more capable farmer ever attended market. It's only the sea and the want of money that ever made me hanker to steal. Yes ; poverty's made me do a heap of mischief one way and another. I believe," he added tentatively, " It would be worth somebody's while to make me a well-off man even now. I'd be a deal safer that way."

" It's probable," said Onslow dryly ; " at any rate, for the while. But I don't feel inclined to pension you off myself. For one thing, I couldn't afford it out of my own pocket ; and for another, I'm not going to let you have your pickings from the specie. It's been trouble enough already, and if I can't have it for myself, I'm jolly well going to make my conscience pat me on the back for handing it over to the right man."

" I believe," said Kettle, " I'd do the same if I were in your shoes ; but, you see, I'm not, Mr.

Onslow, and that's why I wish it could be worked different. Hallo! here's the donkeyman back again from his hunting. I wonder what he'll have to say to it all? I wonder whether the donkeyman and I'll chip in over what we've got and a free grant of land in Canada, or whether we'll contrive to get independent for life before we leave this part of the world?"

"Canada sounds likeliest," said Onslow. "You and I might have a shooting-match here in the chart-house till one or other of us was stretched; but I don't see that that would better you, because whatever happens to me, you won't get at the gold. I'm the only person in the world who knows where it's hid, and I'll cheerfully let you empty your revolver at me (if I don't contrive to pot you first), sooner than give it away. As for finding the stuff yourself, you might as well look for a pet mosquito in a nigger village. The ground closed up, during the cyclone, over the place where I put it, and the keenest dollar-hunter on this planet wouldn't start to dig up the Everglades haphazard for a hoard."

"Well, Mr. Onslow," said the sailor, "I'll admit that sounds like square speaking. But, all the same, I think I'd like to hear what the donkeyman has to say upon the question before we close it. You see, he and I are running partners now, and it's only right that he should have his

say. The donkeyman has *savvy*, there's no mortal doubt about that ; and if he sees his way to give the new firm a good solid boost-up over this business, I'm the man that's going to help him. I owe that to myself, not to mention the missis and the kids."

"Go on," said Onslow, "and argue it out with the donkeyman. Only I hope you'll see it my way in the end, because I don't want this entertainment to end up with a shooting-match. I like you both too well to want to see either of you die in front of my pistol ; and (what I have far more concern in) I most particularly don't want to be killed myself just now."

"Because you have a lady waiting for you when you get back?"

"That is so," said Onslow. "Respectable married life will come to me as a novelty, and I'm anxious to taste it."

"I wonder if you ever will?" said Captain Kettle thoughtfully.

Then he turned to the donkeyman and gave him a careful sketch of what had happened, and drew vivid pictures of the bucolic joys to be extracted from five hundred thousand pounds.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A FLIGHT AND A RESTING-PLACE.

MR. THEODORE SHELF had arranged for an exodus *de luxe*, and flattered himself that he would have no difficulty in carrying it out. He had got to know exactly when the police were going to come for him at the house in Park Lane, and had slipped away from there in his own brougham, so as to leave himself a comfortable margin of start. He had stepped out of a railway-carriage at Newport, whilst all the authorities fondly imagined he was still on his way to Liverpool; and, with George and a small russia-leather handbag, had taken a cab down to the docks.

He pulled out his large gold watch, looked at it, and smiled. Punctual to the minute! He paid his cabman, and, with the dog at his heels, stepped daintily amongst the litter on the wharf to where a single gang-plank joined it to the *Gazelle*, one of his own steamers. He went on board and shook hands with the captain.

"All your portmanteaux have come, sir," said

that officer. "I saw them put into your room myself last night."

"And the wine?"

"Nine cases of it, sir, stowed in the cabin store-room. My steward got in all the other things you ordered exactly as they were written out on the list, and for a cook I have managed to secure a man off a big Cunarder—by paying for him, of course. But, then, you told me, sir, I was not to spare cost."

"Quite right, Captain Colson; quite right. Money must be no object when we have health to consider; and my advisers tell me that it is absolutely dangerous for me to remain in England any longer. A change is imperative for me. You are ready to get under weigh?"

"We finished coaling an hour ago. We are only waiting for you, sir."

"Then," said Mr. Shelf, with a pleasant smile, "do not rob me of another minute of my hard-earned holiday, captain. Use your magician's wand and waft me from the cares of business and the coal-dust of Newport—as quickly as ever you may. I will go below now and snatch a wink of sleep; and when I wake, let it be to breathe the pure sea air as it comes in sweet and clear and salt from the mouth of the Bristol Channel."

The captain was a practical man, who did not appreciate rhapsodies. He said, "Very well, sir;

"I'll get her under weigh at once," and left for the upper bridge.

Mr. Theodore Shelf, with George at his heels, went below, undressed, and turned in. He slept placidly, and meanwhile the steamer worked out of dock and began to make her way down the reddened waters of the great estuary. He dreamed of conquering another financial kingdom for himself in a South American Republic. It was a very pleasant dream, full of rich and voluptuous detail.

When he woke, he began at once the process of cutting himself adrift from his old life. His clothes of every-day wear—the prim black broadcloth that he preached in, addressed the House of Commons in, wore for business purposes in the City—lay in a ruffled heap on the cabin floor. He unscrewed the port-hole, and dropped the garments one by one on to the sunny waves which raced by outside. And then he drew from his portmanteau tweeds of a daring pattern and yellow boots and a smart straw hat ; and in ten minutes he was another man. The smug, hypocritical smile was gone from his face, and his lips pouted lovingly round an excellent cigar.

Except by stealth he had not smoked for fifteen years, and as the fumes went up he felt that he was burning a pleasant incense to his new-bought liberty. He would have smoked in bed

had he thought of it; but as it was, smoking before breakfast made the next best thing, since both seemed eminently rakish.

A deferential steward knocked at his door, and announced breakfast. Mr. Shelf strolled out into the main cabin, threw his cigar into the alleyway, and sat up to the table. The captain and the second mate were mealing with him, and, by the faces of them, they felt out of their element before the epicurean *menu* which the Cunarder's cook had sent up in place of the usual hash and tea. But Shelf took the lead, and called for champagne to drink *bon voyage*, and unwrapped himself into a glittering host, and had them at their entire ease in less time than it takes to eat a curried egg. There was no holding the man. He was free with his speech as a bookmaker at Monte Carlo; he was witty, scurrilous, irreverent; he brought out tales which made even the captain grin dubiously. In fact, he showed such a fine vein of breezy sinfulness that the captain (who had been in his service for many a weary year) marveled at his strength in ever keeping it under.

George was the only person who understood it all. George sat on a cushioned locker and grinned and appreciated Mr. Shelf's changed manner to the full. If he could have shown derision for the gulls they had left behind in England, he would

have done it cheerfully. Mr. Shelf was all George's world. He was a most immoral dog.

* * * * *

Now it came to pass that a sudden change swept over the scene. Whilst Mr. Shelf was initiating his new friends into the beauties of an after-breakfast liqueur, the steamer's helm was put hard a-port to avoid a fishing-boat which had got in her way; and whilst he chose a cigarette from his elaborate silver case, the steam steering-gear chose to break down, and before he had lit the dainty roll of tobacco and blown out his match and inhaled four puffs of smoke, the steamer was hard-and-fast ashore on one of the outlying reefs of Lundy Island.

The mate in charge on the bridge had done his best with reversed engines, but the steamer's way was too great, and the ported helm gave her a steer which no one could govern; and so she took the shore on a falling tide.

Mr. Shelf's vocabulary lengthened still more surprisingly. The scheme of easy escape had of a sudden been snatched away. The fear of worse than death was upon him, and he cursed the mate, the steamer, and all within her by all the gods he had ever served. The captain suggested that the blame would fall upon the pilot in charge, and Mr. Shelf cursed the pilot with fluent rage. The man was in a perfect hysteria of passion and rage.

But by degrees he calmed down, and, when the shipboard flurry was at an end, drew the captain aside and addressed him confidentially.

"When can you get her off?" he asked.

"Next tide, if I wanted to; but I don't. My mate's been below, and he says there are half a dozen plates started. I'm sorry, Mr. Shelf, but this is going to be a job for the salvage people. I hope, sir, you'll take into consideration that it's through no fault of mine the old boat's got herself piled up. I know you don't give berths to any officer who's once been unlucky, even though he has kept his ticket clean; but, seeing that I'm a shareholder——"

"Man!" broke in Shelf, passionately, "you must get her off with the next tide, and try and push on across the Atlantic. I can't afford to waste the time. Good heavens, Captain Colson, you have pumps! What are pumps for if they can't counterbalance a bit of a leak? Besides, the weather's fine enough."

The captain stared. "You don't seem to understand, sir," he said. "This isn't a new ship, and she's stove in three compartments, at least. She'd go down like a broken salmon-can if she put into deep water. Of course, we should get off right enough in the boats; but, seeing that you were on board, I fancy the insurance people'd think there was something hanky-panky about it

and refuse to pay. And, any way, if we tried anything half so mad I should lose my ticket for good."

"Man," said Shelf, putting ten shaking fingers on the captain's arm, "we must go on at any risk, if it's only to Spain—if it's only to France."

The captain looked at him queerly. "What's this mean?" he asked.

"I dare not go back."

"And why not, please?"

"I've been unfortunate in business, captain, and it is absolutely essential that I should remain abroad a month or so till matters are settled up again."

"Ho!" said Captain Colson, "I'm beginning to see. And which business, please, have you been unfortunate in?"

"What does it matter? Several. Captain, you are wasting time."

"There is no immediate hurry, sir," said the captain, stolidly. "May I ask if the 'Brothers S. S. Association' is down on its luck amongst the other concerns?"

"I'm—er—I'm afraid it isn't very prosperous," said Shelf.

"Bust?" inquired the captain.

"Confound you, yes!" roared Shelf. "What do you mean by questioning me like this?"

"I've got £300 in that blessed company."

"Ah!" said Shelf, changing his tone. "Well, that is unfortunate. But," he continued, with a significant nod of the head, "I've managed to save a little something for myself out of the general wreck, and if you will see me safe out of the country, captain, I'll underwrite those few shares of yours for five hundred per cent."

"No," said Captain Colson, "I'm damned if I do! That three hundred's about all my pile; but I got it clean, and I'm not going to keep it dirty."

"Do you mean," said Shelf, with growing terror, "you're not going to help me out of the country?"

"That's about the size of it."

"Good heavens, man, the police will take me, and there will be a trial, and everything I have done will be distorted and misunderstood! I shall be eternally disgraced! They will give me penal servitude!"

"Your fault for earning it," said the captain.

"You fool!" broke out Shelf with a fresh snarl; "don't you see you are robbing yourself? If you give me up you lose your own miserable £300. If you get me off you'll pocket £1500. Hang it, man, I'll give you three thousand!"

"You said," retorted the captain, "you'd got some pickings out of this wreck with you! Well, I guess the proper owners'll have that when the

time comes, and I shall have my sixty-fourth, or whatever it is, along with the rest. I know twenty decent men who've got about all they own in your rotten concerns, and I wouldn't think it a fair thing to feather my own nest whilst they got skinned to the bone.—I'll trouble you, Mr. Theodore Shelf, to take your hand off my arm, or you'll get your bally teeth knocked down your throat. Don't you come near me any more—you ain't wholesome!”

“I will take one of the boats,” said Shelf, desperately, “and get out into the Channel, and try and get picked up by some outward-bound steamer.”

“You will do,” retorted the captain, “nothing of the sort. There's a tug coming up now to our assistance, and I shall send you off to Bideford in her in charge of my mate. If you're awkward, you shall travel with a pair of rusty handcuffs on your heels. I'm going,” said the captain, with an acid grin, “to make a bid for popularity in the newspapers. I'm going to be known as the man who nabbed you when you tried to bolt, and I hope I shall get some sympathy for it; and I hope some one will be kind enough to give me another berth in consequence.”

“Just hear me one minute more,” Shelf pleaded.

“I've got no use for any of your talk,” said the captain, sturdily; “and there's the boat in the

water. Down you get into her, or else you'll be put by a pair of quartermasters. You'll board the tug, and my mate'll see you safe ashore in Bideford. After that, you can go to the devil for me; but I expect the police'll be waiting ready for you."

Mr. Theodore Shelf stepped on shore at the Devonshire seaport a free man, and free he remained for that night and the succeeding morning, as there was no warrant in the town on which to arrest him. The whole place knew his name, and crowded round the hotel where he stayed with open-mouthed interest. The local police bit their fingers, and betted odds that he would commit suicide; and on suicide the wretched man's thoughts continually turned. But he could not screw himself up to the pitch. He read with morbid carefulness the newspaper accounts of the crash, and he dulled his soul with brandy. Save for one other thing, that was all he did till the police came and fetched him away. His remaining action was a typical one. He ordered in a local tailor, and once more attired himself in somber black broadcloth. The bright-colored tweeds he burnt. If he had to go back to London, it should be as the ghost of his old self, and not as the caricature of his new.

Of the man's journey to London, and the peering crowds at every stop, there shall be no further

word here ; nor of the frenzied attempt to lynch him, which a crowd of his victims made in Paddington Station ; nor of the sensational trial ; nor of the awful details of destitution which spread all over the face of the land. These things were written of at length in the daily Press, and the memory of them is new and raw. Therefore they need not be repeated.

One other short look at him must suffice for the present time.

CHAPTER XXV.

CLOSING STRANDS.

HAMILTON FAIRFAX came into the drawing-room of their newly bought house in Kent and kissed his wife, and sat down in a deep armchair. She perched herself upon the arm and leaned her shoulder against his. He was looking gloomy, and she commented on it.

"I don't feel cheerful, my dear, and that's a fact," he said. "I've had to run down to Portland to see that pernicious old guardian of yours, and the sight of fallen splendor is never very exhilarating."

"Poor Mr. Shelf!" said Amy Fairfax, softly. "I suppose he deserves his fourteen years, but, on my soul, I'm sorry for him. I wish from my heart that he had managed to get away in the *Gazelle*."

"And scoffed at the law?"

"Oh, bother the law! I'm thinking of the man; not of what he did. He was always most kind to me."

"If it hadn't been for some one else who took

an interest in you, my dear, he'd have made off with your fortune with his other plunder."

"Don't blow your own trumpet, Hamilton. I know quite well all about that. But the facts remain that he didn't get it; and that he was always fond of me; and that he maneuvered to get me out of the house that awful night when the *exposé* came. That last thing alone would make me think kindly of him if nothing else did. What is he doing now? Tell me!"

"Studying the mechanical properties of oolitic limestone; making up to the jail chaplain; and sampling a diet which is entirely new to him. He's gone through his spell of solitary work, and is employed now in the quarries. He has lost three stone in weight, wears his knickerbocker suit most jauntily, and looks brown and muscular, and vastly healthy. He is not so dejected as one might expect. He has a position in Portland just as he had in London. The humbler operators look up to him and envy his dashing knaveries. They naturally feel a respect for a man who has pilfered more pounds than they have stolen pennies, and yet earned no heavier a sentence."

"You are bitter against him, Hamilton."

"I know I am, dear, and I can't help it. The very sight of the man makes my gorge rise inside me. When I think of the awful misery he has caused to so many thousands of people, I feel

that the only thing suitable for him is one of those Chinese punishments with physical torture in them. He couldn't have risen superior to that. But as it is, he has had strength of mind to accept the situation philosophically, and use his wit to make it as endurable as possible. They told me he is a model convict; gets up early and cleans his cell; sings in chapel with noise and zeal; works in the quarries with cheerfulness and intelligence; and is as keen to earn all his marks and his shilling a week without stoppages as ever he was to turn a profit in the City. He was sent into penal servitude to suffer and repent, and he isn't doing either. He's amusing his brain by humbugging the chaplain with a well-acted repentance, by courting admiration amongst the other convicts, and by scheming to get the largest possible amount of bodily benefits possible under the circumstances. And he's looking forward to a snug and comfortable retirement when his spell of prison is over. He's a living piece of ridicule to the law that sentenced him, and I felt that I wanted to make him wear a *cangue*, or to pour boiling oil over him, to make him properly sorry for himself."

"Well," said Amy, "if married people didn't differ occasionally, married life would be very dull. This is one of the times when we counter-act dullness, because here I don't agree with you

in the very least. I'm quite human enough to be glad that a man I always liked is making the best of a very bad job. I know he'd feel the same if I were in his shoes. He always liked me—and George. Now it isn't many men who, when the trouble was thickest on them, would have taken all the care he did over a dog."

"Well, George has got a comfortable berth here," said Fairfax. "But old Shelf needn't have made such a fuss about it. We'd have given the animal a home just for the bare asking."

"I like him for the fuss," Amy retorted. "It wasn't humbug in the least; any one could see that. He just loved that dog, and he was genuinely anxious about what was going to happen to him."

The fox-terrier, who was lying on the hearth-rug, gave a lazy tail-wag at hearing his name mentioned, and blinked sleepily.

"If fatness is any criterion, George has got a very comfortable job of it as dog to this establishment," said Fairfax. "He seems to drop into altered circumstances as philosophically as his master does."

"I wonder what Mrs. Shelf is doing now," said the young wife, dreamily. "I wonder if she is alive anywhere. She could not have disappeared more completely. She was seen on the night of that memorable ball; and the next

morning she was not ; and no one seems to have got a word of her since. I do wonder what has happened to her."

"That," said Fairfax, "is the other piece of news I have for you, and though you may like her fate, it isn't to my taste at all. The lady is not only very much alive, but she is practising her old game with the most brilliant success in Paraguay. She is now Donna Laura Anaquel (which is 'Shelf' in a Spanish garb), a grass widow, and the leader of State society in Asuncion. The reigning President is a widower, and the Bishop of Asuncion has offered to grant Donna Laura a divorce on the ground of desertion. It is a polite piece of attention, and according to accounts she could certainly be Mrs. President if she liked ; but she has refused to cut herself adrift from the excellent Theodore ; and at the pace she is going will probably get herself elected Dictatoress of the Republic at the next election or revolution, or whatever it may be, through sheer weight of influence and popularity. She is really a most astounding woman."

"She's as clever as paint, if that is what you mean. But why Paraguay ? and what's she doing it on ? That sort of amusement costs money."

"Of course she has money at her command. Previous reputation counts nothing, either one

way or the other, in that blissful republic. But with money and wit you can do mostly anything you want. As usual, she has to thank Mr. Theodore Shelf for the sinews of war. He, bless his heart, foresaw his crash in this country for two whole years before it came to pass, and bought a fine *estancia* near Asuncion, and transmitted shareholders' money to banks in that city to run it on. She's got hold of the lot, and as England has no extradition treaty with the rogues out there, she's making it hum. That woman's a lot too clever for my liking, Amy; but I've one solid hope for her. Either she may meddle with politics too much and get shot, or else she may work out human justice by spending up all the stolen hoard, and leave that old rascal Shelf nothing to fall back on when he gets out of Portland on his ticket-of-leave."

"That," replied Mrs. Fairfax, "is another point on which we will disagree amiably. According to accounts, there is room for much improvement in Paraguay in every way. The Shelves are just the people to bring it about. They simply bristle with energy. If he had the handling of the finances of the country they would be bound to take an upward turn; and, for the social part, she is just the one woman in all the world to lay down an entire set of new and up-to-date laws. Moreover, she'd make them dress like Christians and Parisians,

and that is an art (if one may believe pictures) in which they are obviously deficient."

"Hum," said Fairfax. Your notions may be generous, Amy, but I'm afraid they lean towards anarchy."

"I am grateful to people who have done well by me personally, that is all. "You apparently are not. You might remember, my dear boy, that it was through Mrs. Shelf that you and I came together in the first instance. But, perhaps, you are angry with her for that? You may be tired of me already?"

Hamilton Fairfax laughed, and drew down his wife's face to his own, and kissed her three times. "If you put it that way," he said, "I shall have to swallow my resentment against the Shelves for good and all."

"That's right," said Amy. "Now I like you ever so much better. I say, ring the bell and let's go out for a spin in the tandem."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE LUCKY MAN.

NO one ever accused Mr. Reginald Lossing of having brains ; no one ever denied that he had a luck which was monumental. He had a name for luck which was looked up to and marveled at, even in the society papers.

Mr. Lossing had no settled trade or profession ; he was like unto a lily in the matter of toil and dress, and he made a very comfortable income at it. He dabbled in outsiders on the turf, in shares of uncharted gold mines, in the fascinating game of unlimited loo ; and was able to look complacently on the results. He went into all these and other operations with a genial, childish simplicity ; and, like the banker at roulette, there always seemed a steady pull in his favor. How it was done no one knew ; he did not know himself ; and he and all his world marveled, and prophesied that his luck would some day turn with a rush and a sweeping tide.

When he got mixed up with the Shelf affair it seemed as if this would be the case.

There was something very near akin to a panic in Lloyds' when the total loss of the *Port Edes* was reported, and those unfortunates who had underwritten her were anxious to dispose of their risks at remarkable prices to any credulous man who believed that this first report was a *canard*. Consequently there was some pretty steep gambling gone through in the space of minutes, and more than one small man got broke with surprising rapidity.

Now, Master Lossing happened to be in the room as an idle spectator, and was hit with the excitement, and asked a friend who was a member to act for him. "I'm going to play a hand in this," quoth Master Lossing.

"At what price?" asked his friend.

"When they get to ninety-eight guineas."

"I suppose you know that makes you liable for about £10,800. There's £540,000 underwritten."

"I'm good for that," said Lossing; and an hour afterwards proved himself so, as he had to pay. To this day many Lloyds' men, who were interested in that scene, congratulate themselves on having made £10,800 salvage by a fluke out of a ship that was totally lost.

It began to dawn on Lossing after the event that he had made a fool of himself, and that his luck was through; but he had the sense not to

whine aloud, and so his friends forgot the matter in the excitement of other interests. Lossing did not forget, because the bank had written to him that his account was overdrawn, and he had several bills which much wanted paying. Unostentatiously he began to look about him for a means of making a more regular and steady livelihood.

As after several months of search this last did not seem any appreciably nearer, he was able to give full attention to a letter he received concerning the *Port Edes* and her cargo. It was unsigned, and bore an American postmark. It ran as follows :—

“Sir. I hear that you are now legitimate owner of the *Port Edes* and her cargo. She was picked up at sea, and is now in the Everglades of Florida in (here followed the exact latitude and longitude). The specie is taken out of her, and you will find it by digging (here came elaborate cross-bearings and directions). If you are a wise man, and wish to enjoy what is now legally your own, you will say as little about the matter to any one as possible.”

The communication was, to say the least of it, mysterious; but, because Lossing was a fool, he did not see so many possibilities in it as a man of more imagination might have done. Moreover, having failed to discover the suitable occupation, the before-mentioned, he was feeling that the end

of his tether approached, and appreciated the loneliness of the void which lay beyond. So, with all before him, and nothing behind, he determined to find out how the matter lay with his own eyes, and with that purpose journeyed to the hotel at Point Sebastian, now rebuilt with new magnificence.

It was the Floridan winter season, and the place was crowded, and amongst the crowd was Lossing's old friend, Kent-Williams, again at the end of a new quarter's allowance. Mr. Reginald Lossing stayed a week at Point Sebastian, and, by the kindly offices of Kent-Williams (who remained on as his guest), he learnt much about the manners and customs of Floridan society.

Knowing Patrick Onslow, he heard with interest about his marriage to Miss Elsie Kildare, and with amusement the details of the send-off.

"There wasn't much money throwing about," Kent-Williams explained, "but we did the thing in style for all that. She was married from here, and old Van Liew did the heavy father to perfection. I was best man in a two-dollar alpaca coat (I'll trouble you) by way of purple and fine linen; and a singer-fellow, who was down here for D. T., howled 'The voice that breathed o'er Eden' as good as you could have got it done in Milan. There was a regular A 1 feed to follow,

and then the pair of them went off to the depôt behind the best trotting team in this section. They're going to settle out west, but where exactly I don't know, though I suppose we shall hear one of these days. We'd high jinks after they'd gone. Some of the boys got a bit full, and there was a trifle of a row, and a Balliol man and a Cracker from round here got laid out; but they were both regular toughs, and nobody missed them; and, besides, a thing like that lent local color to the wedding."

"Yes," said Lossing, "but touching this other matter I've been speaking about," and went on to discourse about a certain steamer and some specie, which was a topic he had very much at heart just then. Kent-Williams picked up the subject with interest. There seemed to be money in it, and money was a commodity which he most ardently desired.

That was not the first conference they had had by any means, nor was it the last, for some projects take much pre-arranging, especially if the projectors are not gentlemen of any marked ability or experience. But, at the end of a week from Mr. Lossing's first appearance at Point Sebastian, a definite plan had grown in their heads, and with a small equipment they set out in a 10-ton schooner for a down-coast river said to lead into the Everglades—they and five others, whereof

two were disrated nautical men, and one an engineer.

The saga of their doings for the next six months does not appear, but it is known that the schooner returned twice, and took back with her provisions and digging implements (which were paid for in yellow English gold), and each time gathered two or three more recruits of varied tints. There must have been quite a colony of them out there, and legends floated out from the 'Glades of strife amongst themselves and of a fracas with Seminole Indians. But nothing definite transpired, and, in fact, the exact location of the colony itself was quite unknown. That part of Florida does not attract the explorer for many reasons.

It was not, I may say, till some seven months later that Messrs. Kent-Williams and Lossing deigned to reappear before the eyes of polite society, and then (for some reason which may not be very comfortably explained) it was on one of the Royal Mail Company's steamboats bound homewards from a port of Eastern South America. It might have been remarked that Lossing carried a newly healed scar above his right eyebrow.

The pair of them sat in cool cane chairs under the shade of the awning, watching in silence the low shores dip under the sea, and smoking Brazilian cigars with massive contentment.

It was Kent-Williams who, when the last palm-tree had disappeared beneath the waters, first made speech. "So that's done with," he said. "I feel ten years older, but it's done with, and we've got what we wanted."

"Done with it is, thank my precious luck," said Lossing. "I'm glad as a man can be; but I tell you I'm bubbling with surprise still that the thing should ever have come in my way. It's a bigger puzzle than I shall ever make out in this life. Think of it! First a steamer—my steamer, that I draw out of a gamble, which is supposed to be sunk—gets up, and goes overland, and plants herself firmly in the middle of a solid forest, as though she wanted to grow there like a tree. We have it on the most reliable accounts that the crew deserted her out in the Mexican Gulf; but some unknown somebody comes up and paints a different color on one of her smoke-stacks, and leaves the other as it was, and screws new cast-brass name-plates on all her engines and fittings, and leaves the lifebuoys labeled '*Port Edes of Liverpool.*' But then the gold in her flies two miles further up-country, and dives twenty feet under the ground, without disturbing the mangrove roots. And you will please to remember that that same network of wood cost us two days of hard cutting with an ax before we got through it. Now, if a man can ravel

all that out, I swear he ought to be burnt for sorcery."

"It was the fishiness of the whole thing that impressed me most," said Kent-Williams, thoughtfully. "I think, dear boy, we've been very wise chaps in selling your blessed steamer with a brand-new set of names on her to a Spanish man who gave a low price and asked no questions. It was quite honest on our part, seeing that the steamer and her cargo were legally yours; but I shouldn't be surprised if, by keeping dark, we've saved a lot of trouble for somebody else."

"It's very probable," said Lossing. "But I wonder who? D'you know, old man, I'd give a couple of thousand, out of sheer curiosity, just to know how all this racket has been fixed up. It seems to me some way that Pat Onslow must have had a finger in it."

"Do you think," retorted Kent-Williams, "that if Patrick Onslow had his finger on half a million, which no one else knew about, it wouldn't have been his half-million? No, sir. That cock won't fight. Besides, Onslow was spooning the Kildare girl, and that took up all his time, I guess. Heigh-ho!" said Kent-Williams.

"What's that for?"

"Which?"

"The sigh."

"Did I sigh? Well, I was thinking about Mrs.

Duvernay, the Kildare girl's sister, that Onslow was spoons on himself one time. She's a deuced nice-looking woman."

"So you've said before."

"I know. Between ourselves, Lossing, dear boy, I went up to her place one evening and proposed to her; and—this is in confidence, mind—d'you know, by Jove! she actually refused me. She's got that fellow Onslow still in her head, I suppose. But I shall go out and have a look at her again. Honestly, I was after her £500 a year at first; but now that (thanks to you) I'm better off, it won't look so bad; and, really, I like her better than I thought. She's a most awfully charming woman."

"Whatever did she marry that brute Duvernay for?" asked Lossing.

"Ah, that," replied Kent-Williams, "is more than I can tell you."

THE END.

SEP 14 1899

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0002204915A